

THE INVESTIGATORS in

THE MYSTERY OF THE INSECT ATTACKS





in

**THE MYSTERY
OF THE
INSECT ATTACKS**

Mrs Hazelwood is terrified of insects and believes that encountering them is the forerunner of disaster for her. Since young, she has been having nightmares and hallucinations about insect attacks. When hornets appear in her house and sting her housekeeper, Mrs Hazelwood panics. Despite taking precautions, she gets bitten by mosquitoes and very soon exhibits symptoms of a deadly disease. The Three Investigators act quickly but find strange things happening in her house. Meanwhile, Mrs Hazelwood's condition gets worse...

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of the Insect Attacks

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Die drei ???: Insektenstachel

(The Three ???: Insect Sting)

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1. Heat

Jupiter woke up. All around him was absolute darkness. Only the digital display of the radio alarm clock on his bedside cabinet spread a weak, greenish light. It was exactly midnight. Jupiter's head felt fuzzy.

He'd just had the strangest dream. He tried to remember it, but his mind was blown away. So he closed his eyes and tried hard to concentrate on the dream but it was in vain.

"This can't be true..." he muttered to himself. "Are these the first signs that I am suffering from amnesia?"

He turned to the other side and pushed the pillow under his head. Again he tried to let the dream images arise in his mind's eye. Nothing. The most diverse memories passed by in his mind, but none of them wanted to fit into the dream he had just experienced. Why had he woken up at all? Only now he noticed that he was sweating all over his body. Even his blanket felt damp. Did he have a nightmare? He stood up and wiped his forehead. The whole room was warm.

Jupiter got out of bed and went to the opened window. A thermometer was attached to the outer frame. At first he didn't want to trust the display. So he narrowed his eyes and checked again. It was hard to believe—the temperature outside was 29°C! It was hardly cooler in his room.

With a groan, he stripped the wet sweaty T-shirt from his body, then he went to his desk and started the desk fan. The whirling propellers created a pleasant draught. He returned to bed with a yawn. It was unbearable under the blanket, so he pushed it aside, lay on his back and stared thoughtfully at the ceiling. It was mid-summer.

Jupiter could not remember ever having been exposed to such unacceptable temperatures. His palate felt dry. He wanted a drink. Palpating his hands, he reached for the mineral water bottle beside the bed. The sparkling water refreshed him. Again, he looked at his alarm clock. It was 4 am. He felt himself getting tired again. Slowly he closed his eyes and slept.

The picture of his two friends, Pete and Bob, was created in a shadowy way. In his mind, he was standing with them in a cornfield. And suddenly,

the memories of his dream came back. They had sat together in a car that had slid down a steep slope. It had stopped in a cornfield. They had got out of the car when suddenly a man jumped out of the bushes! At this point the dream had ended abruptly. Jupiter tried to fall asleep to continue the dream. Slowly and as if through a wall of fog he returned to the action.

Then suddenly he heard a buzzing sound in his right ear. A mosquito!—it shot through his head. He drove up and jerked the chain of the bedside lamp.

Where was the bug? He looked around. If there was anything he couldn't stand, it was getting stung by a bug. But there was nothing to see. Jupiter wondered whether a mosquito might have intelligence and consciously avoided the gaze of its victim? Once again he inspected his bedspread and the wallpaper next to his bed. Then he decided to quickly switch off the lamp again otherwise the light would attract more insects.

He lay on his stomach and tried to fall asleep. After a few seconds, he flinched again. There it was again! Now the buzzing approached his ear from the other side. Jupiter flapped his hand around. He listened.

Now nothing more could be heard. Irritated, he reached for the blanket and pulled it up over his ears. It became uncomfortably warm, but he would rather accept that than be bitten by the mosquito. After some time, he finally fell asleep...

The news from the clock radio ripped Jupiter out of his dreams at seven o'clock. He was still sweating. Then there was a knock on the door from outside.

"Come in!" Jupiter rubbed his sleepy eyes. His uncle's face appeared in the crack of the door.

"Good morning, Jupe! I see you had a hot night too! Your aunt and I almost died of heat in the bedroom. And even now it's hardly cooler, it's rather muggy. The high humidity is causing my circulation to suffer. Therefore my tip to you is this—stand under the cold shower! That will invigorate, refresh and tone up your body."

With a whistle on his lips, Jupiter slipped out of bed. His whistling fell silent in front of the small wall mirror.

"My goodness!" Jupiter cried.

"What happened?" Curious, his uncle approached.

"Look at this, Uncle Titus!" He pointed to his left earlobe. It was swollen red. "That mosquito got hold of me after all, even though I spent

the whole night under a warm blanket because of it!”

Uncle Titus couldn't help smiling. “Now get a grip! You won't die from a mosquito bite.”

“I realize that, but my body is not a self-service pump for blood-hungry insects.” Jupiter rubbed the itchy earlobe.

“Speaking of hungry, Aunt Mathilda has already set the breakfast table. The cornflakes with milk are accompanied by freshly picked strawberries. I have already tried one. They are juicy and sweet.” He ran his tongue over his moustache. “Delicious! If you want us to leave you any, you'll have to hurry!” He was walking away, but turned back. “Oh, by the way, don't forget we have an appointment with a client today at 2 pm. If what she wants to offer is interesting, we can take it back with my truck right away. I may need you to help me with that.”

“All right, Uncle. You can count on me as always!”

At 1:30 pm, Jupiter got into the truck with Uncle Titus. When they left Rocky Beach and headed towards Beverly Hills, Jupiter's extra fresh T-shirt, which he had put on before the journey, already showed several sweat stains. He moaned loudly. “It is no exaggeration to call this weather the summer of the millennium.”

Uncle Titus agreed. “I, too, must confess I have never known a summer like this. And yet I'm several years older than you. The weather service's forecast does not bode well. For the time being, there is no significant temperature fluctuation in sight. It will remain uncomfortably stuffy.”

Jupiter breathed again. Now they drove through a shady palm tree alley, Milton Drive. “Do you actually know anything more specific about the client we are now visiting?” he changed the subject.

“Not a thing.” Uncle Titus shrugged. “We only had a very brief phone call. She was pretty low profile. She didn't want to give me the details until I got there.”

“That sounds exciting!”

“I'm sceptical,” Uncle Titus said. “Probably just a bunch of moth-eaten clothes. Beverly Hills is mostly populated by people with money, but they're usually pretty stingy. When they voluntarily part with something, there's usually a catch.”

2. Collections

‘Janet Hazelwood’ was the name on the tarnished brass plaque.

Jupiter pressed the doorbell button and looked at his uncle questioningly. Uncle Titus nervously tugged at his moustache. The two of them remained restless in front of the door, but nothing moved in the house. “I wonder if she’s forgotten the appointment.” Jupiter pressed the doorbell button again.

“I can’t imagine that. Mrs Hazelwood has taken great pains to ensure that we arrive at her house at 2 pm sharp.” Uncle Titus pulled his straw hat down deeper into his forehead and took a look at the watch. “On the telephone she made a very reliable impression on me. Maybe something important has come up.”

“At least then she could have left us a message.” Jupe took a few steps back and inspected the property.

The two-storey country house in the middle of Beverly Hills was hidden behind tall hibiscus bushes and was overgrown with ivy. It made an abandoned, almost uninhabited impression. At the entrance door, the dark green paint flaked off and in some places the plaster trickled out of the masonry.

The windows were covered with dirt and one could hardly see through them. Jupe looked very closely, and he could see potted plants behind the windows, whose colourful flowers made it clear that someone had to live in the house to look after the plants.

“Look over there!” Uncle Titus pointed at the overgrown garden. “Perhaps Mrs Hazelwood is in the old garden shed. The door is opened.”

Jupe was about to leap over the adjacent flower bed to have a look into the crooked garden shed when the door rattled. Shortly afterwards, the front door opened and an elderly woman wearing dark sunglasses stepped out of the doorway. “Mr Jones?”

“I am.” Uncle Titus took a step towards the lady and extended his hand to greet her. “And this is my nephew, Jupiter. I’ve brought him along to help me.”

The lady showed no reaction and instead adjusted her sunglasses, so Uncle Titus pulled back his hand in a state of uncertainty.

“I’m Janet Hazelwood. Sorry to keep you waiting, but I was just upstairs in the library. Unfortunately I’m not so good on foot anymore. Please come in.” She smiled and turned her head to the side. “Strange. Where is Laura?”

Jupiter followed Mrs Hazelwood and Uncle Titus into the hall and closed the front door behind him. At the end of the hall, a wide stone staircase, lined by two marble columns, led to the upper floor.

“Who is Laura?” Jupiter asked Mrs Hazelwood.

The lady stopped at the landing. “My housekeeper.” She formed her hands into a funnel. “Laura!” There was no reaction.

Mrs Hazelwood stepped behind the stairs, where a metal basement door was concealed. She pulled the knob. With a squeak, the door opened and Mrs Hazelwood called down into the darkness. “Laura!”

“Maybe she’s out in the shed,” Jupiter concluded. “Anyway, we saw that the door of the garden shed was opened.”

“Then I’m sure she’s getting the garden hose to water the plants. It hasn’t rained in weeks. This tropical heat is killing me.” With a heavy sigh, Mrs Hazelwood stepped to one of the marble pillars and clasped her neck. “I was in hospital for many weeks. Since then, a lot has been left lying around in this house. Now Laura is helping me. She’s only been with me for a few days.”

“Mrs Hazelwood.” Uncle Titus looked around the barren hall. Apart from a huge stone vase from which several sunflowers proudly stuck their heads up, there were no other furnishings in the room. “You didn’t tell me much over the phone but only about something that you wanted to sell to my salvage yard for a reasonable price. What kind of inventory are we talking about?”

“You get right to the point, Mr Jones. I like that.” Mrs Hazelwood groped for the banister and slowly up the stairs to the top floor. “Laura and I have already packed the things. Please follow me.”

When Jupiter and Uncle Titus had reached the first floor, they expected emptiness here too. The walls of the corridor from which four doors led off were bare. Not a single picture adorned the surroundings. Only a woven raffia carpet covered the corridor, which crunched with every step they took.

Mrs Hazelwood opened a door and led them into a spacious room with three shelves reaching up to the ceiling. The shelves were empty.

“My library,” Mrs Hazelwood said with a bitter tone. In doing so, she bumped her shoe tip against a monstrous pile of boxes, which took up the entire right-hand side of the room opposite the window.

Jupiter skimmed the number of boxes and found that there were exactly twenty-seven.

Uncle Titus approached the pile and looked at Mrs Hazelwood with interest. “Are there books in these boxes?”

The lady nodded. “Picture books, dictionaries, novels, children’s books and non-fiction.” She opened the lid of a box and waved her two visitors towards her. “Feel free to look at anything.”

Jupiter’s eyes began to glow. On the spine of one book was *Foreign Word Encyclopedia*, on another, *The Greatest Crimes in World History*, and right next to it he discovered *Alfred Hitchcock’s Movie Archives*.

Awe-inspiringly Jupiter pulled out the leather-bound illustrated book with a photo of the famous movie director on the cover. He knew this book. He had held a copy of it in his hands several times in an antiquarian bookshop. However, the salesman did not want to be bargained with as he was not prepared to sell this magnificent rare book for under \$300.

“I have here a list of all the books arranged by subject and alphabetical order, together with the relevant information like author, edition, publisher, and publishing year,” Mrs Hazelwood explained. She opened another box, ran her fingers over the spines of the book and pulled out a copy, which she held out to Uncle Titus. “*Van Gogh—The Master’s Early Works*. It’s a first edition, 1946.”

Uncle Titus carefully received the book of the gifted painter. He knew he was holding a precious treasure in his hands.

“From *The History of the Third Reich* to the *Indian Tribes of North America* to the *Conquest of Space*,” continued Mrs Hazelwood. “From Mark Twain, Albert Einstein, Mozart to the Beatles. This library contains over five hundred books. Without dog-ears and grease spots. Most of these books are out-of-print a long time ago.”

“I’m sure they are.” Jupiter was still leafing through the Hitchcock volume with fascination. He could scarcely take his eyes off the numerous photographs. “The condition of this book is many times better than the copy in Mr Drummer’s second-hand bookshop.”

Mrs Hazelwood made a scornful noise. "I will not let that wretched cut-throat have another book from my collection. When he opened his shop here years ago, I was foolish enough to sell him an encyclopedia of American history—a first edition, published in 1904. I was lucky enough to own two of them. You know what an encyclopedia is, young man?"

Jupiter sat up to full height and looked Mrs Hazelwood straight in the face. Her eyes were not visible behind the dark lenses of her sunglasses. Instead, they reflected his radiant countenance. "Of course. It's a book, set of books, or other informational resource for many areas of knowledge, typically arranged in an alphabetical or a systematic form."

An appreciative smile played around the corners of the lady's mouth before she continued in an angry tone. "Be that as it may. Mr Drummer was thrilled with that rare specimen! But at the same time, he told me that he could only pay me \$50 at most. Although the book is precious, he claimed that it is difficult to find a buyer."

"Did you let him have it for \$50?" Jupe asked.

Mrs Hazelwood nodded. "Yes, I did. Then I learned from friends that they saw the book in his shop window. Mr Drummer had put it up for sale for \$420!"

"An impertinence," commented Uncle Titus with conviction and put the Van Gogh illustrated book back in the box.

"Of course I knew the book was valuable," the lady was still excited. "But I thought Mr Drummer was an honest man and would sell the copy reasonably to a customer interested in history."

"It's none of my business," Jupiter said carefully, "but when I see all these precious books here, there is no comprehensible reason for me to sell these partly rare editions to a second-hand shop. This is a fantastic library! How can you ever part with it? Even if you are in financial difficulty, I don't understand."

Mrs Hazelwood winced. Then she lowered her voice. "You are still young. At your age you cannot yet imagine that there are other reasons for parting with this dearly beloved and meticulously assembled collection, which has truly grown dear to my heart over the years."

Jupiter felt hurt by Mrs Hazelwood's words. He did not like the lady treating him like a little child. He took the offensive. "Perhaps I'm not quite grown up yet. However, apart from a financial problem, I see no reason to dispose of these treasures completely. Especially since your heart is set on it. You're too young to move to a nursing home."

Mrs Hazelwood's fingers began to tremble. "Do you really want to know the real reason?"

Jupiter nodded. Silently the lady took the sunglasses off her face and opened her eyes. When Jupiter looked in, he felt the ground beneath him threaten to sink away. He became dizzy. Mrs Hazelwood's eyes were no longer recognizable as such. There were no pupils and no irises. Just two white balls that seemed to be staring into space.

Mrs Hazelwood was blind.

3. Screams

Jupiter could not bear the sight for long. It went right through him. For a few seconds, he closed his eyes. When he opened them again, Mrs Hazelwood had already put the sunglasses back on. He took a deep breath and looked over at Uncle Titus. His uncle seemed to have lost his voice at the demonstration as well.

“Excuse me,” whispered the lady into the entered silence. “But I’m bitter, and I feel so powerless. The doctors couldn’t save my eyesight. I’ll be blind for the rest of my life.” She swallowed. “It’s so hard for me to accept it.”

Jupiter immediately realized why Mrs Hazelwood wanted to get rid of the books. And as if she had guessed his thoughts, she immediately set about explaining them. “The world of letters is closed to me. I won’t get the key back... ever again. I can’t bear the books! Their presence in this house makes me sick.”

Jupiter secretly had to think of the precious illustrated Hitchcock book. Here in one of the boxes the book was waiting to change hands. In his mind he already imagined a place of honour in his own library. Still, he realized how difficult it was for Mrs Hazelwood to part with the books. He was not sure whether, given the circumstances, he could even feel pleasure in receiving the precious illustrated book.

“I’ve read most of what I know.” The lady was standing in the middle of the room pointing to the boxes. “The alphabet consists of only twenty-six letters. In addition, there are various punctuation marks—comma, colon, exclamation mark, question mark, period and the like. These written symbols are enough to make everything described with them appear vividly in the mind’s eye. Every written word is composed of different letters of the alphabet—in infinite variations. In the mind, an image comes together when reading. A painting. The most precious thought. And now I am blind—for half a year now. A hereditary disease. I was not spared it. I’ll never be able to read again!”

Uncle Titus cleared his throat in an uncertain manner. “But what about Braille, ma’am. Fingers can feel the alphabet just as well as the eyes.”

“You know that this kind of writing is a pathetic substitute. Communication between the blind and the sighted is poor.” Mrs Hazelwood adjusted her dark glasses. “By the time science is ready to restore our sight, I shall be long gone.”

Only now Jupiter took a closer look at the lady. He knew that age was best indicated by the hands. He estimated her to be in her mid-sixties.

Mrs Hazelwood tried to smile. Yet her face was overshadowed with sadness. “I must face the fact, however. My fate is irrevocable. The books are suffocating me. Take them away!”

Uncle Titus tugged at his moustache. “Allow me, ma’am. I run a salvage yard, but it’s mostly scrap and junk. Under no circumstances can this library be described as such. I dare to doubt that I am the right buyer for these treasures—especially as I could only pay you a fraction of what these books are actually worth.”

“Then take them on consignment. You needn’t give me the money until you have sold the books,” the lady replied. She crossed her arms behind her back.

“Why didn’t you go to an antique bookseller?” Jupiter tried to find out. “After all, there are several other shops in the area besides Mr Drummer’s.”

“The antique dealers are all criminals! Not in the traditional sense, since they are not acting illegally but from a moral point of view. To give a vendor a cent for a book and then resell it for ten dollars is more than reprehensible. After all, the bookseller is only passing the book on. In my opinion, to pocket almost a hundred times the profit is fraud. I plead for half... fifty percent for the owner and fifty percent for the dealer.

“I’m here for the principle, not the money. Of course, I have also thought of bequeathing the library to social institutions such as hospitals and old people’s homes. But nobody was interested in the books. All my letters went unanswered.”

She ran her hand through her hair. “A neighbour recommended your salvage yard highly, Mr Jones. “You have a reputation for being an honest and fair businessman. I appreciate that.”

Jupiter saw clearly how his uncle was at odds with himself. He could tell by the look on his face that he would refuse the lady’s offer. The effort to resell the books to interested parties would not be worth it for him. After all, Jupe knew that the twelve pallets of copper pipes that Uncle Titus had

bought yesterday afternoon were waiting at the salvage yard. These still had to be cleaned, sorted and stowed away.

Jupiter pinched his lower lip. He always did that when he was thinking hard. He had to get ahead of his uncle somehow. His eyes were glued to the boxes. On one of them were several sheets of paper. He could see that it was the list of the books.

Jupiter skimmed over one sheet on which a book with the title *Genealogy* was listed in the first line. Below that was many other book titles beginning with the letter 'G'. Then it was followed by books beginning with the letter 'H' starting with the volume *Heraldry—The History of Coats of Arms*. Each book was meticulously listed with the respective author or editor, the year of publication and the edition.

Uncle Titus swallowed. Then he took a step towards Mrs Hazelwood. "I'm afraid I cannot accept your offer, ma'am."

"What do you mean?" She twitched her eyelids nervously.

"Well... I must confess I'm not too familiar with literature. I have a good general knowledge, which I at least tell myself, but honestly, the resale of these precious books is beyond my competence. You'd be better off finding someone with more in-depth knowledge than I could ever offer you."

Mrs Hazelwood remained motionless in the room. Her mouth was open. She wanted to say something, but it seemed she couldn't find the words.

"I think I have an idea." Jupiter's face lit up. He tugged his uncle on his sleeve and reached for the book list. "Why not auction off the individual books to the highest bidder? With Bob and Pete's help, this list should make it easy to sell them to the highest bidder. We set a minimum bid and the highest bidder wins."

"And how is all this to be done? Are you thinking about a flea market?" Mrs Hazelwood asked. Jupiter's suggestion seemed to revive the lady's spirits. "And who are Bob and Pete, anyway?"

"My friends and colleagues at the same time," Jupiter enlightened the lady in the important tone of voice. "Together we are a team of detectives and we call ourselves The Three Investigators. Bob is responsible for research and records. That makes him our man who would put the book list to an auction site on the Internet."

Instinctively, he reaches into his pocket and took out their business card. But he realized in an instant that Mrs Hazelwood couldn't read it. He

said: “Mrs Hazelwood, I give you our business card which has our telephone number on it. If you wish, you could ask someone to call us if you need help.” The card said:



“Thank you for that,” Mrs Hazelwood took the card. “However, you might as well tell me your phone number because I can remember numbers quite well.” Jupiter then did so.

“Now, back to the auction site,” the lady continued. “While I am familiar with the Internet, but I have never heard of any auction site. Could you elaborate on that?”

“Anyone can sell private items on an Internet auction site, for example records, furniture, toys, magazines, household appliances, books and much more—simply everything that can be sold. We put the books on the auction site, name a minimum bid, as already mentioned, and offer them for sale over a period of time set by us, for example, two weeks. After the auction period, we’ll sell it to the person who has placed the highest bid. With your proposed fifty-fifty share of the sale, you and Uncle Titus will receive a considerable sum of money. Last month Pete offered a rare Beatles record on the auction site. He had quoted ten dollars as the minimum price. The record went to the highest bidder for forty-five dollars.”

Spontaneously the lady reached out her hand to Jupiter. “Then we are in agreement. You don’t mind, do you, Mr Jones?”

Uncle Titus first looked at his nephew and then at Mrs Hazelwood with astonishment. He felt taken by surprise, but at that moment he did not know how to react.

Suddenly, a shrill scream tore the conversation apart. Jupiter quickly located the direction from which the scream came from and leapt to the window, from which he could see the whole garden. A woman rushed out

of the shed as if chased by the devil and ran screaming and flailing wildly towards the house.

“Laura!” Horror was written all over Mrs Hazelwood’s face. “That’s Laura!”

At that moment, they could hear the front door slamming on the ground floor. Loud screams were coming up to the library. Mrs Hazelwood reacted before Jupiter did, and hurried down the stairs into the large hall, quite swiftly for a blind person. Jupiter and Uncle Titus followed.

“Laura!” Mrs Hazelwood burst into the bathroom from which screams rang out in horror. Jupe saw a woman bending over the sink, hysterically wetting her face with water over and over again.

“Laura! What’s wrong?” Mrs Hazelwood’s voice went up and down. “What’s the matter?”

But the housekeeper was not able to speak. She gasped for breath in violent tugs. Her body was bathed in sweat.

Uncle Titus went on the offensive. He pushed past Jupiter and Mrs Hazelwood, stepped up to the sink and grabbed the whimpering woman’s shoulder. “Tell us what happened! Shall we call a doctor?”

At these words the housekeeper lifted her head out of the sink and looked horrified into the mirror. Looking at her, Jupiter felt his knees threaten to sag for the second time that day.

Three red bumps, which swelled visibly, disfigured the woman’s face into a frightening grimace. It looked as if she had been stung by a bestial kind of insect!

4. Panic

While Laura kept cooling her face with cold water, Mrs Hazelwood trembled all over her body. Jupiter was aware that the lady was dependent on information. After all, she could not see what had happened to Laura.

“Something bit Laura in the face. It looks like insect stings. We have to call the doctor!” Without waiting for a reaction, Jupiter ran back into the hall excitedly and grabbed the telephone. After reaching the emergency doctor, he returned to the bathroom.

The housekeeper was still standing in front of the mirror with her face distorted by pain, looking panically at the swelling bumps. In the meantime, Uncle Titus had soaked a towel with water and handed it to the injured woman.

“Hang in there,” Jupiter tried to calm Laura. “The ambulance will be here in a few minutes.”

“Hornets!” Mrs Hazelwood’s housekeeper laboriously squeezed out “There’s a hornet’s nest in the garden shed! They jumped me as I pulled the garden hose from the corner! My face burns like fire!”

“Calm down, Laura.” Mrs Hazelwood moved closer to the woman and reached for her hand. “Everything is going to be all right.”

“Hornet stings are poisonous!” Laura pointed out while looking in the mirror. “I’m going to die!”

“Nonsense!” Uncle Titus intervened. “Above all, keep your nerve. You have nothing to fear. The doctor will help you in a moment.”

“Can I get you a drink, Laura?” Mrs Hazelwood asked.

“No way, ma’am! Who knows what effect the combination of hornet venom and alcohol has on my body!”

“How many stings are there?” the lady inquired anxiously.

“Three,” Laura whimpered in tears. “Under the eye, on the cheek and above the lip. It hurts so badly!”

“A hornet’s nest in my garden shed? We have to call the exterminator. The nest must be fumigated.” She was still holding Laura’s hand. “When is the ambulance coming?”

Suddenly, Mrs Hazelwood heard a strange buzzing in her left ear. She turned around in a hurry. And she pushed her elbow against her dressing table in an uncontrolled manner. Some cream jars fell on the tiled floor clinking. "A hornet!"

Seized by panic, Laura shot up into the air. "The front door is still open! The insects are coming into the house! They followed me! Kill them! You have to kill them!" She swung on the wet towel to catch the insect flying around the bathroom.

"You must not provoke the insect, Laura! It'll sting you." Jupiter looked around searching. With lightning speed, he grabbed a glass toothbrush cup and followed the hornet's flight direction.

Uncle Titus had meanwhile left the bathroom. They could clearly hear him closing the front door. Suspiciously, Mrs Hazelwood and her housekeeper watched Jupiter's actions as they huddled in the far corner by the bathtub. Jupiter waited until the insect flew towards the closed window and then stayed on the glass. Carefully he approached the hornet and skilfully slipped the toothbrush cup over it with a 'clack'.

"I need something to slip under the rim of the cup," he shouted to the two women. "A postcard or a piece of paper!"

"In the hall," Mrs Hazelwood cried. "By the stairs, next to the telephone." And she made no move to leave her position.

"Uncle Titus! Bring me an envelope or a magazine!"

Faster than expected, Jupiter's uncle appeared in the doorway and handed his nephew a postcard. Skilfully, Jupiter pushed it under the rim of the cup and flipped the trap upside down onto the shelf under the bathroom mirror. Only now did the two women venture out of the corner.

"Well done, Juve!" praised Uncle Titus. Interested, he watched the insect under the glass. It looked like a disproportionate wasp. Its body was about three centimetres long and at the back was the stinger. The sunlight, which was reflected in all colours in the compound eyes, gave the hornet a threatening look.

Disgusted, the housekeeper took a quick look at the glass prison. Her fingers carefully felt the swelling under her left eye. By now it was completely swollen. "These murdering insects must be destroyed. Hundreds of them still lurk in the shed!"

"Here in the house there is no more danger now," Uncle Titus tried to calm the two women. "I have looked carefully. Apart from this specimen under the glass here, no other hornet has entered the house."

“These flying insects have not lost their way, Mister, but are hunting me!” the housekeeper said. “Within seconds, they pounced on me in the garden shed. Until the nest is destroyed, I will not set foot on this property again! When is the ambulance coming?”

“I hear a siren!” Mrs Hazelwood put her finger to her lips. Jupiter, his uncle and Laura paused with pricked ears. Then they heard it as well. From a distance, a siren gradually approached. Mrs Hazelwood seemed to have extraordinary hearing.

The next few minutes brought no new findings. After a quick check, the paramedic decided to admit the housekeeper to hospital immediately, as her swollen eyelid had taken on an unhealthy colour. Furthermore, he was also not quite sure what effects three hornet stings might have had on the body.

“I should have gone with her,” Mrs Hazelwood said as the ambulance drove off with Laura.

“You will be of more help to her, ma’am, if you will now notify a skilled beekeeper to remove the nest and allow the hornets to re-establish themselves in the wild.” Jupe looked out the window towards the garden shed. The door was still open. “Since these insects are protected by law, I consider it irresponsible to have the nest in your shed destroyed by an exterminator. However, hornets are not to be trifled with. Good thing I caught one of them. Perhaps an expert can tell us something about this species.”

“But we can’t wait that long, Jupiter.” Uncle Titus put his straw hat back on. “Remember, we have to be in Beverly Hills at 2 pm to pick up some old office furniture.”

“And what about my books?” the lady asked.

“I can assume we’ve reached an understanding, right?” Jupiter said. “But what I have to do is to check with Bob whether he could undertake this massive task, ma’am. If he is agreeable, we’ll contact you and pick up the boxes tomorrow afternoon, if you don’t mind.”

“What would you say to this, Mr Jones,” Mrs Hazelwood pleaded.

Uncle Titus squeezed the lady’s hand. “All right. I agree. My nephew and his friends will take matters into their own hands.” Uncle Titus tried to keep a strict tone. Yet he could not suppress a smile.

“Then I count on you and your friends, Jupiter,” Mrs Hazelwood breathed a sigh of relief.

The headquarters of The Three Investigators was in a discarded old mobile home trailer located at The Jones Salvage Yard.

Jupiter, Pete and Bob met here the next afternoon. It was oppressively humid. There was a heat wave over the whole city. The small table fan was running at full speed but could not provide the desired cooling. Pete wiped the sweat from his forehead while Bob studied the slips of paper on which Mrs Hazelwood, presumably with Laura's help, had listed the book titles.

Jupiter had described yesterday's experiences to his two friends in great detail.

"I imagine it's terrible to be blind. Nothing but darkness around you." The Second Investigator frowned. "How can you still find your way in life?"

"I think that the other four senses, that is, the senses of smell, touch, taste and hearing in the brain can balance the sense of sight by using them more," Jupe said.

Bob listened up. "What's that supposed to mean, Jupe?"

"In my opinion it is a fallacy that the sense of sight is absolutely necessary for spatial perception. I've been watching Mrs Hazelwood very closely. She moves around her house as normal. She was the first of us to dash down the stairs and purposefully run to Laura in the bathroom. On the one hand this may be due to the familiar surroundings, but on the other hand I noticed that she walks around her house wearing stockings."

"Why is that?" Pete wanted to know as he let the fan blow on his face.

"Here the sense of touch takes on a greater role than in the life of a sighted person," Jupiter explained. "With her feet, Mrs Hazelwood can feel exactly what terrain she is on. Every single strip of the parquet floor, every carpet attachment and every joint of a floor tile let her know where she is at the moment. With her hands, it is certainly much more intense. In general, the whole skin is full of nerve cells that signal the slightest contact to the brain. You just have to be sensitive to it."

"When you think about it, it's actually quite logical," Bob thought. "Smell seems to play a more important role for them than it does for us. I wonder if the blind are able to tell a person by smell."

"Quite possibly. In any case, they perceive smells more strongly," Jupe said.

Pete grinned broadly. "In that case, Jupe, before we visit Mrs Hazelwood, I'll have a quick shower and wash all the odours off my body. Could it be that she won't even notice me?"

“Totally witless and pointless, Pete,” commented Jupiter dryly. “For first of all, every human being has his own odour, no matter how often he washes himself, and secondly, we now come to the sense that is most pronounced in blind people and that makes it almost impossible to hide your presence from them.”

Bob pricked up his ears. “I assume you’re talking about hearing.”

“Right. Even before I realized anything, Mrs Hazelwood heard the hornet in the bathroom and the ambulance siren.”

“That’s gotta mean something with super hearing,” Pete said. “And what about the sense of taste?”

“Not much different, Pete.” The First Investigator pulled a roll of caramel drops out of his pocket and offered it to his friends. He then proceeded to shove a piece of candy in his mouth... and they enjoyed it as the candy melted in their mouths.

“So, how do you like it?” Jupiter asked.

“Excellent. But what is the purpose of this little demonstration?” Bob had already chewed up the drop.

Jupiter leaned back relaxed in the armchair. “If you now close your eyes and concentrate on the caramel in your mouth, you will notice that the taste is more intense than when you suck the candy with your eyes open. In any case, it is all five senses that gives us perception. Having said that, even without the sense of sight, I would venture to suggest that Mrs Hazelwood’s powers of perception are far more pronounced than a sighted person’s.”

“Though I wouldn’t want to trade places with her, I’m very much looking forward to meeting her,” Bob said.

The First Investigator took a look at his wristwatch. “In ninety minutes, Bob. I’ve arranged for us to arrive at her place at 6 pm to pick up the books.”

“You were talking about twenty-seven boxes?” Pete reassured himself. “Even if we take our two cars to her house, we can’t get them back in one trip. So we’ll have to drive twice.”

The ringing of the phone tore the three investigators from their conversation. Jupiter grabbed the phone and simultaneously pressed the loudspeaker button. “The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking.”

“I’m Janet Hazelwood.”

Jupe had a strange feeling. The lady’s voice sounded fragile. “How nice of you to call. We were about to leave for your place. Will you be

staying for our appointment or can we do anything else for you?”

“I expect you at 6 pm sharp, as promised.” There was a yawn coming through the speaker. “You’ll have to excuse me, but I slept very badly last night and my whole body was stung by hornets. But only in my dreams. Oh, what am I saying—it was a nightmare! Last evening, a skilled beekeeper came and removed the hornet nest from my garden shed. After the expert had looked at the nest, we had to wait until dusk. He had explained to me that he could only start work at dusk, when all hornets had flown back to their nest. Basically, it went pretty fast and smoothly. But in my lifetime, I will certainly never forget the sound of those dangerously humming hornets in the beekeeper’s special container, where the insects were safely stored for resettlement.”

“How is Laura now?” Jupiter inquired. “Has she been released from the hospital?”

“Yes. Last night. The doctors gave her a painkiller and a cooling cream. That was all they could do for her. Now she is doing as well as can be expected. Still, a feeling of fear creeps up on me. So I ask for your help.”

“What is it?”

“I’ll explain that in more detail later. Could you go to the stores and get me mosquito nets for the windows and front door?”

“I will do that,” Jupiter said helpfully. “Do you have the exact measurements?”

“Eight windows. Each one metre wide and one metre fifty high. The entrance door is one metre twenty wide and two metres fifteen high. You know those mosquito nets that are attached to the window frames with tape?”

“Sure thing, ma’am. You can rely on us completely.”

Suddenly, Mrs Hazelwood lowered her voice to a whisper “The sky is darkening. I can feel it. The hornets were just the harbingers. Some danger creeps into my house. I don’t know if I can fight it off. But I’ll try everything humanly possible. Please be on time.”

Then Mrs Hazelwood hung up.

5. Heartaches

The hands on Jupiter's watch were at 5:58 pm when he stood with Bob and Pete in front of Mrs Hazelwood's house and pressed the doorbell button. It was still a tropical climate. Even the Second Investigator, although he was well-trained and the most athletic member of the team, was troubled by the high humidity.

The front door opened and Jupiter, Pete and Bob looked astonished at a woman, who was about fifty, looking harshly at them. She flashed her cold eyes at The Three Investigators.

"You're right on time. Even before the chimes. Come on in. Mrs Hazelwood is expecting you."

"That's very kind," Jupiter reacted sarcastically. Together with his friends, he pushed himself past the woman, who obviously wasn't very pleased with the visit.

Almost immediately, The Three Investigators also found out the reason for her behaviour.

"Because of you, I have come in vain," the woman said. "You couldn't have picked a more convenient date. For me, it was a two-hour drive for nothing."

"Excuse me, ma'am, but you'll have to explain that to us in more detail," Bob politely followed up. He didn't want to start an argument.

"A waste of time." The woman pulled a silk scarf from the coat hook and wrapped it casually around her shoulders. Then she turned and shouted upstairs, "The three young gentlemen are here, Janet! See you next week."

Without giving Jupiter, Pete and Bob another glance, she rushed out. In doing so, she let the door close into the lock with a thud.

"Lovely person," Pete remarked aptly. "I wonder what bit her?"

"Never mind. Jennifer's just having a bad day." On the first floor, Mrs Hazelwood leaned against the stair railing. Wearing stockings and with nimble steps, she hurried towards the three.

"Ma'am, these are my friends, Bob and Pete," Jupiter said. "I suggest we put the books in both cars right away. We'll probably have to drive

twice, as Pete's MG is not too spacious. There is even less space in Bob's car. He drives a yellow..."

"Beetle," Mrs Hazelwood interrupted him. "I could tell by the sound of the engine. My late husband also drove this model. It was almost a year ago. He died in it." Bob turned white as a sheet.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. But when I heard the car earlier, the memories came back. Fate has dealt me a severe blow since then. The loss of my husband, then my momentous operation and now... Now it seems a new calamity is brewing."

"That is something you must explain to us," Jupiter asked Mrs Hazelwood. He hoped to be able to persuade her to say what she had already hinted at on the telephone.

The lady adjusted her sunglasses. "First you should load the boxes into your cars. Then I'll put on some tea. I hope you have a little time..."

"We've kept the rest of the evening free for you, ma'am. We are at your disposal." Jupiter pointed upstairs. "Let's get started right away, fellas."

Full of zest for action, The Three Investigators went up the stairs to the library. Jupiter went ahead. A few minutes later, he was seized by sheer desperation as he carried the boxes down.

Physical exertion was abhorrent to him. On the one hand, this was due to his overweight figure, on the other hand, he considered himself more of a 'head person'. He preferred to have others do the physical work for him. In return, he took over the thinking and deducing. But in the present situation, there was no way for him to avoid work. He wanted to make a good impression on Mrs Hazelwood. He cursed that the boxes were filled to the brim. Mrs Hazelwood and her housekeeper had probably assumed when packing that experienced removal men would take care of them.

After half an hour, most of the boxes were finally stowed in the two cars. The clothes stuck to the boys' bodies and Juve snorted like a walrus. They took a seat in Mrs Hazelwood's spacious kitchen. The lady had just lifted the whistling kettle from the stove. The teacups were already on the table. In the middle, a large plate of biscuits was waiting. The First Investigator could not resist the temptation and reached out.

"This is lapacho tea. With this heavy air, it's just the right thing. It quenches the thirst and calms the nerves." She prepared the tea with a series of routine movements. "When are you coming for the second load?"

“If it suits you, tomorrow at the same time,” said Jupiter with a full mouth. “The rest of the boxes can fit into Pete’s MG.”

“Thanks for scheduling me for the task, Jupe.” Then Pete turned to the lady. “I’ll come tomorrow, ma’am, not just because Jupiter has made it a habit to make decisions over other people’s heads. That has to change sometime.”

“Forgive him, my love,” Bob smirked. “Jupiter remains Jupiter. With his views and his figure, he’s our First Investigator.”

Mrs Hazelwood sat at the table with The Three Investigators. Her hands played nervously with a teaspoon. “It’s nice to have life in the house. I am glad you are here. I only wish the occasion were different. Instead, the past catches up with me, I’m afraid.”

“From what?” Bob asked. He knew that Mrs Hazelwood wasn’t going to give them the run-around. Despite her present condition, she seemed to him quite down-to-earth and facing reality.

“I was married for ten years to a man I idolized.” She poured the tea into the cups as naturally as she spoke. Not a drop went missing.

“My family, who were very rich, opposed this marriage because Gill, that was my husband’s name, came from a simpler background,” Mrs Hazelwood said. “He was a poor man, to put it mildly. But I didn’t care about that. It was love at first sight.

“I wanted that man. Nothing in the world could make me stop it. As a result, my family turned their backs on me. I have never forgiven them for that.” She blew into the hot tea and sipped gently. “I haven’t had any contact with my family for more than 11 years.”

Bob was nibbling on a cookie. “Well, you can’t choose your family...”

“... But you can choose your friends, I know. In my case, it’s my own husband,” Mrs Hazelwood added. “But then, after seven years, a shadow began to cast over the shared happiness. Gill suddenly took a liking to gambling and gradually squandered much of my wealth.”

“You let this happen?” Pete asked in surprise.

“I loved him. To the point of self-sacrifice. I guess I had to go through that. Of course, it led to bitter and bitter arguments over and over again, which in the end I was not entirely innocent of. After all, I did give him the money. I was so afraid that he would leave me otherwise. His presence was more important to me than the money.”

Pete cleared his throat, embarrassed. He saw a tear running down Mrs Hazelwood's glasses. Again her facial features tense up.

"By 10 August of last year, I had reached a point where I could no longer bear it. Gill turned his back on me more and more. He was now completely addicted to gambling. So I decided to file for divorce. I was going to tell him that night. But I waited for him in vain. He spent the whole night at his regular casino, Joker-Luck, in Santa Barbara. Then in the early hours of the morning, I received the news that he had been killed in a car crash in his Beetle. For me, a world fell apart. To this day, I still can't get over his death. I'm ashamed that I wanted to leave him. I should have freed him from his gambling."

With trembling fingers she placed the teacup on her lips. "Now he's gone, and I have no way of making up for the mistake. This feeling causes me the most intense heartache."

Jupiter thought differently about this matter, but at the moment he denied himself any comment.

"Six months later, I lost my sight," Mrs Hazelwood continued with her story. "Sometimes I tell myself that it was the just punishment for my behaviour. It's silly, of course, but I do have thoughts like that from time to time. I can do nothing about it."

She got up from her chair and desperately rubbed her hands. "And now I come to the point that makes me afraid, and I have been holding my breath since this morning..."

6. Trauma

Mrs Hazelwood leaned against the fridge door and buried her hands in her skirt pockets.

“Since childhood, I have suffered a terrible trauma. I was seven years old at the time and I was haunted by terrible nightmares. You must know that my nostrils have been too close together since birth. They make it difficult for me to breathe, so I usually breathe through my mouth.

“The first time I spent a night at a friend’s house, she laughed at me the next morning and teased me that I looked like a mummy when I slept because my mouth was open and deformed. I laughed along because I thought the comparison was very original and I didn’t think anything of it. But somehow this remark must have struck me inwardly, because a few nights later, I dreamt that there was a spider’s nest under my bed.

“The spiders were hungry and looking for prey. While I slept, countless of them crawled into my mouth to find something to eat in my stomach. But some of the spiders got lost and ended up in my windpipe. I suffered choking and choking attacks until I suddenly found myself sitting upright and sweating in my bed. It took several seconds before I realized that it was just a terrible nightmare and not real.”

Pete almost got the cookie stuck in his throat. Mrs Hazelwood’s story had thoroughly spoiled his appetite.

“And then what happened?” Jupe wanted to know.

“In the following nights, I was permanently robbed of sleep by similar nightmares. Insects appeared again and again in it, trying to penetrate my body in every conceivable way. When I told my parents about it, I was not taken seriously at all. ‘Dreams have nothing to do with reality’, was the only thing my father said. But that did not help me much. Still, I tried to tell myself that every night before bed.”

“Was it successful?” Bob asked me briefly. He didn’t want to confuse the lady in her flow of speech.

“After a few nights, these cruel dreams actually faded and receded more and more into the background until they finally disappeared completely. I still remember the night I had a pleasant dream for a long

time. I was in love with our neighbour boy and dreamt of us laughing, eating ice cream and walking through Disneyland with our bags full of money. When I woke up, I could have hugged the whole world. I felt like I was freed from an evil curse.” Her brief smile gave way to an expression of desperation. “Life is often cynical. Because after I thought I had finally found my peaceful sleep again, the dark nightmares became reality.

“The very next day I played hide-and-seek with my friends in the nearby forest. I can still clearly remember how I climbed down a steep hill in search of a suitable hiding place. Suddenly I lost my balance and fell onto a fallen, rotten tree trunk. Under the force of my impact the rotten wood crumbled—and that was my downfall. The hollow trunk contained a wasp nest. The angry wasps immediately pounced on me and attacked me so badly that I barely escaped.”

“Hence your insect phobia,” Jupiter concluded, memorizing every sentence Mrs Hazelwood said. “The fear of certain objects or situations. I was wondering why you were so hysterical about the hornet in the bathroom yesterday. You seemed to me to be even more afraid of the insect than Laura. You were barely able to speak, even though your housekeeper was the victim.”

Mrs Hazelwood sat down at the table with The Three Investigators again. “I panic every time a mosquito comes near me. You must know that even after that fall into the wasp nest, disaster was far from over.”

“What else happened?” Pete poured himself another cup. He enjoyed the lapacho tea extraordinarily.

“After I was discharged from the hospital, it was about a week later, I was sitting in school after class and I couldn’t get up from my chair.”

“What?” Bob looked at Mrs Hazelwood with disgust.

“I suddenly had the most severe pain in my hip and could not get up from my chair. The janitor had to call an ambulance and I was taken back to the hospital.”

“And what was the diagnosis?”

“Strangely enough, Jupiter, the doctors could find nothing out of the ordinary. Two days later, I was released. However, it took me almost half a year to walk properly again. Since then my parents have called me a ‘hypochondriac’ when I complain of any physical ailment. You know what a hypochondriac is?”

“A person who continuously worries about their health without having any reason to do so,” Jupiter revealed his knowledge. “But why didn’t

your parents believe you?”

“At the time I was admitted to hospital straight from school, my parents originally wanted to travel to Europe as a couple to spend their tenth wedding anniversary there. As the doctors could not find anything during the examinations, my parents were convinced that I was only faking the pain in order not to be left alone.”

“It’s an outrageous impertinence of any kind to make such an assumption out loud at all,” Bob said outraged.

Fearing she might be overheard, Mrs Hazelwood suddenly began to whisper. “The insects are the forerunners of disaster for me. Whenever anything terrible happened in my life, it was announced by a drastic experience with these crawlies. It’s no coincidence. Even on the night I waited for my husband to tell him that I wanted to divorce him, I watched a stirring documentary on television about insect phobias. The next morning, I received word that Gill had been killed in a car accident.”

“But all this can also be a regrettable coincidence,” Pete said to consider. Secretly, however, he had to admit to himself that with this theory he could hardly convince Mrs Hazelwood otherwise.

Excited, the lady dropped her fist on the tabletop. “Half a year later the nightmares returned. After almost fifty years! In one of these nightmares, I was haunted by locusts that ate the hair off my head. Two days later, during a routine examination, my eye doctor told me that I had to accept that I might go blind in the near future! And you still talk about a coincidence?”

“Mrs Hazelwood,” Jupiter spoke calmly to the lady. “Now I finally understand why you’re so upset. Yesterday’s incident with the hornets in the garden shed. You believe that this is the beginning of a new wave of misfortune that is about to hit you. Am I right?”

The lady nodded silently. For a moment, there was absolute silence in the kitchen.

“Is there anything we can do to help?” Bob broke the silence.

Mrs Hazelwood nodded again. “Have you brought the mosquito nets?”

Pete got up off the chair. “They’re in my car. I’ll get them.” He left the kitchen and returned shortly afterwards. In his hands he held two shopping bags. He put the contents onto the table.

With her hands, Mrs Hazelwood felt the cardboard boxes.

“What time is it?” she asked.

“It’s almost 7 pm.” Jupe knew what she was getting at and beat her to it. “Shall we put the nets up for you right away?”

“You’d be doing me a great favour and taking a heavy load off my mind.” She opened one of the boxes, pulled out the folded net and ran her fingers over it. “I should have thought of this before. I only hope it’s not too late.”

“What are you talking about?” The Second Investigator pulled a folding rule from the side pocket of his pants and started measuring the kitchen window.

“Laura called me this morning after she was discharged from the hospital. She had overheard a conversation between two doctors at the hospital. They were standing in the corridor talking about her hornet stings. Laura heard something terrible.”

Breathing through her mouth, Mrs Hazelwood began to walk about the kitchen restlessly. “One of the doctors said that Laura was somehow fortunate that it was a hornet attack.”

“What did he mean by that?” Bob went into it in surprise.

“Laura was also surprised at this statement.” Mrs Hazelwood remained at the kitchen table, her hands resting on it. “In any case, the doctor said that he was relieved that Laura had not been bitten by mosquitoes that transmit an unknown parasite which is the cause of a dangerous sleeping sickness. Here in California, they said that there have been ten such cases this year alone, and the victims of the mosquito bites have fallen into a coma-like state.”

“What?” the First Investigator exclaimed. “I haven’t heard a thing about this.”

“That’s just it.” Mrs Hazelwood fixed her sunglasses. “Laura reported to me that the other doctor then hissed something at his colleague. It was something like that: ‘If it became public, it would cause a panic. The civilian population should not be informed of this until the pathogen is identified.’”

“That’s something!” Pete was stunned. He scratched his forearm purely as a reflex. “Well, let’s just put the mosquito nets on quickly.”

“I sense something terrible is about to happen. I can literally smell danger. Like gas leaking from a faulty pipe.”

“Keep your nerve, ma’am,” Jupiter tried to calm Mrs Hazelwood. “In less than half an hour, we shall have turned your house into a fortress where no mosquito will be able to get at you from outside.”

The lady sat down on the chair again full of restlessness.

For the next half hour, during which The Three Investigators meticulously set to work, she did not speak a word. It was only when Jupiter put down the scissors he had used to cut the nets to the right size and Mrs Hazelwood shouted an optimistic “All done!” She gratefully embraced the three boys one by one.

“Unfortunately we have to leave now,” said Jupiter after a quick glance at the clock. “My aunt and uncle are waiting for me for dinner.”

“Don’t let me stop you boys,” Mrs Hazelwood calmly said, although each of The Three Investigators felt that she was reluctant to part with them.

“We’ll see you tomorrow, after all,” Jupiter said.

“Now we haven’t talked at all about the handling of the auction of your books, ma’am,” Bob remembered and drank the last sip from his teacup. “After all on the Internet auction site, we have to set a minimum bid for every book title. I think you should determine the amount.”

Mrs Hazelwood calmly waved it away. “I don’t worry about that any more. I’m glad I was able to pour my heart out to someone—someone who can also listen.”

“Didn’t Laura listen to you?” Pete asked straight out.

Mrs Hazelwood shrugged. “Laura is only interested in herself. She does all household chores for me, but taking care of a person is not necessarily her strong point. I offered her to move in with me at the interview because I feel quite lonely in this house now and then. But she strictly refused. She has a small apartment in Santa Monica.”

“And who was the lady who received us so rudely today?” Jupiter tried to find out.

“You mean Jennifer White?” Mrs Hazelwood was certain. “She teaches me Braille and gives me private lessons once a week. She was rather indignant about how I forgot to cancel today’s lesson. Anyway, I paid her the fee. Still, she’s become quite unpleasant. Jennifer feels that I’m learning too slowly. I don’t understand what she’s so upset about. The slower we go, the longer her source of income will be.”

Jupiter smiled. Mrs Hazelwood had taken a fancy to him. After he and his friends had said goodbye to her, he turned again outside the door and smiled at her. He knew she could not see that gesture. But secretly he had the feeling that she still felt it.

7. Inspection

The first batch of the boxes of books were now safely in the salvage yard's storeroom. For some inexplicable reason, Jupiter feverishly awaited the next visit to Mrs Hazelwood's house. Somehow he was fascinated by this lady, but he was just not quite clear why. In any case, he had to negotiate with her about the illustrated Hitchcock book. For the evening before, he had already taken the long-awaited book from one of the boxes and given it a place of honour on his shelf.

Pete had arranged to meet Jupiter at Headquarters the next afternoon before they went to Mrs Hazelwood to collect the remaining books. Bob had no time. He had to wait at home for the electrician as his mother had an appointment with the hairdresser.

"I was up late last night as I couldn't sleep," Pete said. "I kept having those scary nightmares about Mrs Hazelwood."

The First Investigator peeled an orange and handed half of it to his friend. "Think of it as nerve food, Pete. I, too, must confess that Mrs Hazelwood has been in the front row of my mind since the day before yesterday."

"Above all, I no longer trust a mosquito," Pete said. "Do you believe all that stuff she told us? I mean, do you think it's logical that disasters come with a bad premonition?" Unnoticed, Pete wiped his fingers, which were sticky from the orange, on the armchair.

"This phenomenon is not new in nature," Jupiter explained to him. "Just think of the quote 'like rats deserting a sinking ship'."

"I've heard of it, but frankly I don't know the background to that phrase," Pete said.

"Rats supposedly have a sixth sense," Jupiter explained. "They are said to have the ability to sense impending disaster in time—hence the quote. If rats are on a ship that is doomed to sink in a storm, these animals flee in time. Usually at the last port of call before the ship sinks in a storm on the open sea."

Pete listened up. "Do you believe that humans possess this gift as well? Especially Mrs Hazelwood?"

“Frankly, I’m not 100% sure about that, Pete. You know I’m a sucker for logical deduction. I’m quite sceptical about things that can’t be explained rationally.” Jupe made a thoughtful face. “Mrs Hazelwood has been through a great deal in her life up to now. But I am convinced that we can all believe her words.”

Pete took a quick look at the clock. “If we’re going to be on time, we should leave right away.”

“I’m ready, Pete.” Jupiter rose from his armchair and put on his baseball cap. He became suspicious that someone was playing a dangerous game with Mrs Hazelwood’s fears and dark presentiments.

The first thing Jupiter noticed when he got off the MG in front of Mrs Hazelwood’s house was a moving shadow behind a hibiscus bush in the garden. After looking for a while, he realized that it was Laura. With a broom, she swept across the narrow stone slab path leading to the garden shed. Jupiter approached her in a friendly manner, followed by Pete.

“Hello, Laura! Ready to go again?” Jupiter said.

The housekeeper interrupted her work and bashfully lowered her face to the floor.

“Hi, boys! Don’t look at me. I look like a crumb cake. I can’t be seen at the disco for a while.”

Jupiter smiled. “The day before yesterday you looked much worse. How are you doing?”

“I feel like I just hugged a hedgehog.” She swept the earth from the stone slabs with great vigour.

“We want to take a look in there.” The First Investigator pointed to the garden shed. “I’ve never seen hornets build their nest in places like this.”

“The chamber of horrors?” Laura put the broom down. “I’m not going in there for a long while, even though Mrs Hazelwood told me that the entire nest has been removed and relocated. The shed still gives me the creeps.”

“I’m sure Mrs Hazelwood doesn’t mind if we just take a look,” Jupiter said.

“Well, I suppose so,” Laura said. “Then you can go in yourself, but there’s not much to see.”

With quick steps, Jupiter went forward, opened the door and went in. Pete followed behind. The shed was filled with various garden furniture and equipment.

After looking around for a while, Jupiter stepped out of the shed and approached Laura, who was still sweeping the path.

“Could you tell me where the hornet nest was?” Jupiter asked.

“At the far corner of the side wall, there is a garden hose reel,” she said. “The monsters were behind there. I didn’t look too closely. The drum had got stuck somewhere. Probably on the pole of an umbrella there. As I tried to pull that thing out, suddenly those creatures came at me.”

Jupiter then went back into the shed, and called Pete along to inspect the garden hose reel. There were no visible remnants of a hornet nest there. The beekeeper must have done a good job removing it and cleaning up. However, Jupiter wondered how the hornets came into the shed to build a nest. He looked around and saw an air vent on the wall above the hose reel. Perhaps they were not sealed properly, he thought.

A short distance away, Pete saw four wooden slats on the floor. It was clear that they had been removed from the back wall under a sloping beam because there was a dark cavity about ten centimetres deep in the wall there. Pete peered into the cavity, but could not see anything suspicious.

“Strange,” Pete remarked. “A double wooden wall for a shed? What’s the point?”

Jupiter pulled a flashlight out of his jacket and shone into it. In the cavity and on the floor below were scattered fragments of fibreglass wool.

“Gill built this shed.”

Startled, the two detectives turned around. Mrs Hazelwood was standing at the entrance to the shed. She was holding a white cane for the blind. After a brief greeting, she stepped forward. Laura came into view but stood just outside the shed.

“This was originally used as a summer house and workshop, where one could spend time even in the cold season,” Mrs Hazelwood said. “The cavity in the wall is for the insulation material, which is the fibreglass wool. Gill was often here and did handicrafts and artwork. But after his death, I did not want to be in here anymore. So I used this little house as a garden shed.”

“And who broke out the slats here?” wondered Jupiter. “It looks as if it was done by force. There are still splinters of wood here.”

“Probably the beekeeper.” Mrs Hazelwood said. “He would have checked to see if there are any hornets breeding elsewhere. These insects often nest at the beams and in wall cavities.”

“I hope he didn’t miss anything,” Laura said anxiously from outside the shed. “If there are any more of these beasts lurking around here, I’ll quit my job. You can bet your life on it.”

“Quiet!” demanded Mrs Hazelwood suddenly. She pricked up her ears attentively and listened for a few seconds in silence. “Nothing. There is no other nest in this shed. She stepped outside again.” The sunlight was reflected in her dark glasses.

“Too bad Bob didn’t come because I had Laura write another copy of the book list this morning. In it we have now written a minimum bid behind each title. I hope I didn’t set the prices too high. For the illustrated Hitchcock book, for example, I think twenty dollars would be reasonable.”

Jupiter swallowed. “Twenty dollars?” he repeated. He guessed it was the time to let the cat out of the bag.

“Let’s go in the house. We can go through the list in a minute. You can tell your friend Bob what we talked about.” Mrs Hazelwood opened the front door, which she had locked as a precaution, and pushed aside the mosquito net hanging behind it.

Jupiter and Pete followed her into the kitchen. The tea was already made, and stood steaming in a pot on a teapot warmer. Next to it, on the table, was the list of books which Mrs Hazelwood picked up at once.

“I hope Laura did not make a mistake when I dictated the prices.” She handed Jupiter the stapled bunch of papers. “This will give you everything you need for the Internet auction. Remember that the rest of the boxes are upstairs.” She put the tea in the cups.

Jupiter had it burning under his nails. “I don’t want to be impertinent, ma’am, but I must confess that I am very interested in a book from your collection and have already put it on my shelf at home.”

“The illustrated Alfred Hitchcock book,” Mrs Hazelwood escaped straight out. “Right?”

Surprised, Jupiter let the cup sink. “How do you know that?”

“This is the book you took out of the box the day before yesterday and flipped through it from cover to cover. The last section contains original photos, which are covered with tissue paper to protect them from scratching. The noise when turning these pages unmistakably suggested this illustrated book.”

“All due respect, ma’am,” Pete marvelled. “You seem to know every single book you read to the letter.”

Mrs Hazelwood nodded proudly. “Even though I’ve read each of them only once. My husband considered this characteristic a phenomenon. As soon as I finished a book, I put it on the shelf with the others and hardly ever need to read or refer to it again. He often asked me why I would have created a library at all if I didn’t have to refer to the books I had already read.”

“And what answer did you give him?” Jupe wanted to know.

“That being there makes me happy. The presence. The smell.” She took a deep breath. “But that’s all in the past now. I have to close this chapter now. Separation from my books is hopefully a beginning.”

“What should I pay you for the illustrated book?” Jupiter brought the lady back to the present with his question. “Would twenty-five dollars be appropriate?”

“You don’t want to insult me,” she unsettled him in a loud voice. “You’ll get the book as a gift, of course. And your friends can also choose one. No matter what price I quoted.”

“That’s very generous of you, ma’am,” thanked Pete. And Jupiter agreed.

At that moment, Mrs Hazelwood shot up in a flash and cried out in horror.

“What’s that?” Pete also jumped out of his seat on impulse. “What’s wrong?”

Her voice trembled. “A mosquito! A mosquito!” Impulsively, she grabbed the book list and rolled it up in a flash. Armed with this weapon, she pushed herself into the furthest corner of the kitchen, seeking shelter. She held the roll of paper in her hand, raised and ready to fight. “Where is it?” Her breath came in jerks. “Where is it?”

“Keep your nerve,” cried Pete. “I can’t see it!”

“A moment ago, it was right next to my ear! It wants to drain my blood!” Mrs Hazelwood’s face was sweating. “Where is it?”

At that moment, the Second Investigator turned white as a sheet. His eyes were fixed on the back of the lady’s left hand. On it was a huge mosquito!

8. Nausea

Before Pete could react, a short twitch went through Mrs Hazelwood's body. Then her right hand clapped the back of her left hand in a flash. But it was too late. The insect had already bitten.

"Damn!" Mrs Hazelwood gasped harder and harder for breath.

Pete turned desperately to Jupiter. "This cannot go on like this!"

"Mrs Hazelwood, calm down! It was just a tiny little mosquito. It's dead!" The First Investigator was at his wits' end.

"Should we call a doctor?" Pete inquired anxiously.

"Absolutely not," she replied like a shot out of the gun. "I can handle this alone."

"But I don't have that impression," the Second Investigator lent weight to his question.

Mrs Hazelwood rubbed the back of her hand. "I've spent a fortune in my life on doctors, psychologists and pharmacists! They all wanted money. But in return, not one of them could help me even remotely. I don't need a doctor. Just a little confidence."

"And where are you going to get it from?" Pete went into it. He did not let Mrs Hazelwood out of his sight.

"I don't know yet," the lady said. "Somehow I have to get my confidence back."

At that moment the doorbell rang, but Mrs Hazelwood seemed to ignore it. She showed no emotion.

"Shall I open the door?" Jupiter enquired in an uncertain manner.

The doorbell rang a second time now. With a gesture she pointed in the direction of the front door. Without hesitation, the First Investigator entered the hall and opened the front door. Before him was Mrs Hazelwood's Braille teacher.

"Good afternoon, Mrs White," Jupiter said. He tried to keep a neutral tone.

Without returning the greeting, she stared at him with cold eyes. "I'd like to speak to Mrs Hazelwood."

“Then come in. She’s in the kitchen. We’re having tea.” With brisk steps Mrs White rushed past Jupiter, her long silk scarf dragging across the floor.

“Janet!” she shouted furiously. “My wallet! Did you find it?”

“What are you talking about, Jennifer?” Surprised, Mrs Hazelwood turned towards the kitchen doorway.

“When I was here yesterday, I still had it. I know I did. I just happened to be at the mall near here. When I was at the checkout and couldn’t pay, I almost went crazy. In the wallet are all my documents—ID, driver’s licence, credit cards and two hundred dollars. I haven’t used it since yesterday. It must be here!” She looked around in the kitchen.

“Shall we look for it?” Pete suggested.

“That might suit you,” Mrs White snapped. “You’re probably keen on the two hundred dollars... if you haven’t already nailed the wallet.”

Amazed, the Second Investigator hit back at the teacher. “Are you seriously accusing us?”

But Mrs White chose to ignore Pete, instead she turned to Mrs Hazelwood and said: “You don’t mind if I take a look for myself, Janet?”

“No problem,” Mrs Hazelwood said. “Maybe we should ask Laura if she’s seen it.”

“Nothing. I already met her outside and asked her.” It was only now that Mrs White noticed her scarf hanging on the floor. She quickly grabbed it. “After all, there aren’t too many possibilities. Upstairs, the library, the hall and the bathroom. It doesn’t seem to be in the kitchen.”

“Good luck!” cried Jupiter sarcastically after her. He waited until Mrs White had disappeared into the library, then he gave a loud sigh. “Ma’am, you meet up with this person once a week? Admirable!”

“She has her good points, too,” Mrs Hazelwood tried to put in a nice word for her. “I just don’t think she has a special way with young people.”

The Second Investigator briefly sipped his tea and slipped restlessly on the chair. “We should load the rest of the boxes into the car right away, Jupe. I have to study for my maths test and I don’t want to be home so late.”

Now footsteps could be heard upstairs. Mrs White was coming down the stairs. Soon after, the bathroom door swung open. Apparently the teacher hadn’t found what she was looking for in the library.

“The way is clear,” Jupiter told Pete. “Let’s get the rest of the boxes!”

Within a quarter of an hour, the two detectives had stashed the rest of the boxes in Pete's MG. As they left Mrs Hazelwood, Mrs White was still crawling on the floor, looking for her wallet. Luck did not seem to be on her side.

"I'll be in touch, ma'am." Jupiter squeezed the lady's hand. "As soon as anything happens on the website, we'll be in touch."

Mrs Hazelwood did not return to the house until the MG has left her place. Absent-mindedly, she scratched her mosquito bite.

It was still unbearably humid. In Headquarters, it was unbearable despite a fan. For this reason The Three Investigators sat outside on the steps of the trailer the next afternoon, equipped with cool drinks.

Bob studied Mrs Hazelwood's book list. "I tell you, friends, I can sit there for days hammering all of this into the computer."

"It pays to work!" Jupiter popped open the top of his water bottle. "Uncle Titus has decided to give half his earnings to us. That means a quarter of the profits for us!"

"We can be grateful to Mrs Hazelwood," Bob said.

"You said it, Bob." Pete drew circles in the sand with a stick. "Fate dealt her a terrible hand. Let's hope there's an end to it soon."

"After what you experienced yesterday, it seems increasingly unlikely. Didn't you say that..." Bob's question was interrupted by the phone ringing in Headquarters.

"I'll get it!" Pete was in the trailer in a split second and picked up the phone. "The Three Investigators. Pete Crenshaw speaking."

"Janet Hazelwood here. I just wanted to make sure you got home all right last night?" Her voice sounded strangely drowsy. "Did everything go all right?"

Alarmed, Pete beckoned his friends. Then he pressed the loudspeaker button.

"Mrs Hazelwood?" the Second Investigator enquired in a worried voice. "Is anything wrong? What is it?"

"I'm not doing well at all. I threw up all over last night. I still feel sick. Besides, I'm terribly tired. I'm lying in bed, but I can't sleep. I'm so terribly afraid."

"What are you afraid of?"

"The symptoms occurred yesterday about two hours after I was bitten by a mosquito. I suspected it." She took a break.

“What?”

“I am infected. The pathogens are in my blood now!”

9. Bloodsucker

“Shall we come to your place?” Pete asked anxiously. “Or call a doctor?”

“Didn’t you listen to me yesterday?” Her voice sounded like a rattle.

“No doctors or charlatans. I’m already ruined by them.”

Pete wouldn’t let up. “Is there anything we can do to help you?”

“Thank you. No need. Laura makes me cool compresses every hour. She stayed with me here last night but hasn’t slept a wink since. But I’ll send her home right away.” She yawned loudly. “I’m so tired. I want to sleep so much. But the fear—it keeps me awake! Those miserable mosquitoes...”

A crackling sound came from the loudspeaker. “Hmm... She hung up.” The Second Investigator put the phone down, confused. “You can feel sorry for her. Maybe she is a hypochondriac after all.”

“So you are considering that Mrs Hazelwood is imagining things?” The First Investigator made a serious face.

“Not necessarily. But more likely she ate something at dinner that didn’t agree with her body.” Pete stepped outside again. “In any case, I think this theory is more plausible than being infected by a mosquito... these things are basically harmless.”

“You can’t say that, Pete.” Bob sat down on the steps of the trailer again. “Because last night, I did some checks.”

“And what did you check on?” Pete asked.

“Mosquitoes are notorious for two reasons. Firstly, they have the bad habit of sucking human blood, and secondly, they can transmit serious diseases such as malaria and yellow fever. But not all mosquitoes are bloodsuckers, and not all bloodsuckers are after human beings. Many prefer other mammals or even certain species of birds.” Bob emptied the rest out of his lemonade bottle in one go. “By the way, only the female mosquitoes sucks blood, because they need your protein for its eggs! The males feed exclusively on flower nectar and the juice of ripe fruit.”

“Okay, so do mosquitoes sting or bite? Or both?” Pete wanted to know.

“A sting is different from a bite,” Bob replied. “When an insect stings you, it will puncture the skin and injects something into you, like saliva or venom, or even leave behind its ‘sting’ with or without venom. A sting is like a syringe. When an insect bites you, it will leave a wound in the skin. The type of insect that you are bitten by can determine what type of reaction you will have.

“But for a mosquito, although we conveniently call it a ‘mosquito bite’, it does not bite in the regular sense of the word, but neither does it sting. Instead, a mosquito sucks!”

“Ha ha ha!” Pete laughed. “Yes, they really do suck—in every sense of the word!”

Bob continued with his lecture: “A mosquito injects you with its proboscis which contains two tubes. It uses one to inject saliva that contains a mix of chemicals to reduce pain, thin your blood and prevent it from clotting. The other tube is used to suck your blood. The mosquito’s saliva can carry viruses that it received from hosts that it had attacked previously. It is these viruses that pass on the diseases associated with mosquitoes.”

Pete put his lemonade bottle on the floor. Suddenly, he no longer felt thirsty.

“From this point of view, and bearing in mind that the doctors at the hospital were talking about a similar matter, we cannot rule out the possibility that Mrs Hazelwood has been infected after all.” Jupe pinched his lower lip.

“Then we are all in danger!” The Second Investigator shot up. “Perhaps these dangerous mosquitoes happen to breed in the garden of the Hazelwood mansion. We shouldn’t go anywhere near there! We must inform the authorities!”

“May I remind you that a few minutes earlier, Pete, you sounded very different.” Jupe made a moralizing face. “Did you not think earlier that Mrs Hazelwood was a hypochondriac and the mosquitoes were essentially harmless?”

“Of course,” the Second Investigator defended himself. “But if you can believe the doctors in the hospital, the matter appears in a completely different light!”

“Nevertheless, the probability that Mrs Hazelwood, of all people, was bitten by this species of mosquito is extremely small,” Jupe said. “Los Angeles has a population of 14.4 million people. If ten people were

infected by the insects, that's a thousandth of a percentage point behind the decimal point."

"Still, I feel uneasy about it. Just thinking about mosquitoes makes my whole body itch." Bob stretched his legs out. "By the way, did you know that the first attempt to build the Panama Canal had to be abandoned after nine years? One of the reasons for this was that mosquitoes were swarming all over the workers. Almost 16,000 people died of malaria or yellow fever during this period."

"All the reason not to let this matter rest," Jupiter commented.

"You're talking about Mrs Hazelwood, Jupe?" Pete sighed. "You almost sound as if we have a new case. We do not. At most, our task would be to persuade the obstinate lady to seek medical attention. Only a competent specialist can determine whether she has indeed been infected with a pathogen."

Jupiter nodded. "I will go to her tomorrow to see for myself the state of her health. And I would appreciate it if one of you or preferably both of you would accompany me there—for reasons of convenience alone. After all, I'm not the proud owner of a car!"

When the First Investigator pressed Mrs Hazelwood's doorbell, it did not make a sound. He pressed it again. "Nothing," mumbled Jupiter. "Probably turned off. Let's try knocking."

He banged his knuckles on the door. First gently, then more forcefully. There was no reaction. But then The Three Investigators heard footsteps. Shortly afterwards, the key was turned in the lock and the door opened a crack.

Laura's face appeared.

"Hello." She invited The Three Investigators into the hall. To the surprise of the boys, the bumps on her face were barely visible. "There are ringing pranksters here sometimes, or in this case, knocking ones. Mrs Hazelwood told me that she doesn't often get visitors. But she seems to have a new fan base now!"

"How is she?" Jupiter inquired anxiously. "Is she in the house?"

Laura loosened her headscarf and shook her black curls. "Where else would she be? Right now she's sleeping. That's why I shut the doorbell off."

"Why is that?" Pete wanted to know. "As you just said, Mrs Hazelwood so rarely gets visitors."

The housekeeper smiled mischievously. “To tell you the truth, I was more likely to expect Mrs White to return today... because she still hasn’t found her wallet. Mrs Hazelwood tells me Mrs White suspects you. What a cunning little minx. I bet I’m also on her list of suspects, too. Juveniles or a cleaning lady—if anyone’s prejudiced, believe me, it’s Jennifer White. That scumbag has called three times today asking about that wallet. I was just upstairs dusting and from the window, I saw you guys coming. Otherwise I wouldn’t have opened up at all.”

“We are honoured. How is Mrs Hazelwood then?” Jupiter repeated his question.

“A little better than yesterday. Like I said, she’s sleeping now. She is convinced that this mosquito has transmitted some kind of pathogen that’s incapacitating her body.”

“Then she must have herself examined by a doctor!” insisted the Second Investigator forcefully.

Laura laughed mockingly. “Sending the lady to the doctor is as difficult as teaching a cow to speak. I’ve already talked my mouth off... in vain!”

“But there must be a way,” Bob thought. “If Mrs Hazelwood does not leave the house, the doctor must come here.”

Laura shook her head decidedly. “Forget it. After all, we can’t force her. We’d have to get her incapacitated first.”

“I demand more respect,” it suddenly came down from the balustrade on the top floor.

There was Mrs Hazelwood in her nightgown, leaning on the railing. Her open hair was dishevelled, making her look like a night ghost. She walked slowly towards the stairs.

“Uh... Hello, Mrs Hazelwood.” Jupiter was surprised. “We have come to enquire how you are feeling!”

At that moment the lady began to stagger. She tried to hold on to the railing, but her hands reached into the void. With a groan, she slumped to the floor.

10. Hallucinations

Pete was the fastest. At record speed, he sprinted up the steps to the upper floor and bent down to the lady lying on the floor. Her face was snow-white. The dark glasses had slipped from her nose and were hanging across her face. Her eyelids were closed.

“Mrs Hazelwood!” Pete cried. “Are you okay?”

Jupiter hurried up, panting. He was followed by Laura and Bob.

“Did she pass out?” The housekeeper reached for her wrist to feel for a pulse.

Mrs Hazelwood winced energetically. “Nobody touches me, understand? Nobody touches me!” Her voice cracked.

Startled, Laura let go of her. Mrs Hazelwood slowly straightened up and adjusted her glasses. “It’s just a dizzy spell,” she said. “I guess I haven’t been eating very well these days. I will not have a doctor in the house!”

Jupiter wondered. Despite her physical condition, Mrs Hazelwood displayed a determined behaviour that made him reflecting deeply.

“Are you hungry, ma’am?” Laura asked. “I cooked a hearty broth. You know, food keeps body and soul together.”

Mrs Hazelwood seemed to be making a decision based on her visitors. “Would you care to join me? It would be my pleasure. It is more agreeable to eat with company.”

Jupiter, Pete and Bob agreed. The stimulating scent of the broth, which had already got into their nostrils when they entered the house, made their mouths water.

Ten minutes later, The Three Investigators had the honour of sitting in Mrs Hazelwood’s bedroom. Laura had served them broth with toasted white bread.

While the lady sat upright in bed spooning the broth, the boys sat at a small table and tucked in hungrily. Jupiter looked around with interest. He fixed his eyes on a framed photograph that hung on the wall. It was the

only picture in the bedroom. Mrs Hazelwood stood under a tree and laughingly embraced a bald man biting into an apple.

“Is that your husband in the photograph?” he asked.

The lady nodded. “That is Gill. This picture was taken four years ago while picking fruit in our garden.” She dabbed her mouth with a napkin. She still looked exhausted.

“Do you feel better now that you’ve eaten something?” Bob had also spooned out his plate and put it back on the tray.

“The soup did good. High praise to Laura.” Mrs Hazelwood lay on her back in a more comfortable position. Then she folded her hands. “You doubt my sanity, do you? You must doubt my sanity. That would be the logical conclusion.”

“Why?” Jupe asked succinctly.

“After all that I have told you about myself so far and what you have experienced with me, how can you guys take me seriously?”

“I have no problem with that,” the First Investigator openly admitted. “The only question that arises is: ‘What is to be done now?’ Have you thought about that?”

“Days, weeks, months and years.” Mrs Hazelwood was adjusting her pillow. “To no avail. I cannot arrive at a reasonable conclusion.”

“Your health condition is not very stable, ma’am,” Pete tried to make her understand. “Whoever or whatever was the cause of your weakness, you must seek medical attention.”

Mrs Hazelwood pressed her lips bitterly together. “Don’t start that again. Can’t you understand me?” It sounded like a plea. “The doctors couldn’t get Gill back, and they weren’t able to save my eyesight either... not to mention my childhood experiences. If I were to be placed in the care of a doctor now, I would be in danger of being committed to a closed ward.”

Bob pricked up his ears. “You’ll have to explain that to us.”

The lady swallowed. “Since I was bitten by that insect, I have not only been suffering from nausea and fatigue...” She ran her tongue across her dry lips. “I... I think... I’m also hallucinating.”

“Hallucinating?” Pete asked. “What kind of hallucinations?”

“The furniture in this house moved. Even the bed moved last night. While I slept in it!”

“I don’t believe it!” Bob slipped it out carelessly. He immediately regretted this statement.

“The carpet in the corridor has also moved,” she continued whispering. “And the cupboard in the bathroom where I keep my towels is no longer in the same place either. At first I suspected that we had a slight earthquake, which is not unusual in this part of the country. But they didn’t say anything on the news.”

The First Investigator let his eyes wander around the bed. “Where was your bed before you registered the movement?”

“Here under the sloping beam, where it is now,” replied the lady. “It is only a few centimetres... if at all.”

“If at all?” Bob was sceptical. “How did you notice this minimal difference? If my bed at home had been moved ten centimetres, I would never have noticed it. I wouldn’t even see it!”

Mrs Hazelwood put her finger to her lips. “My feet felt it. From the gaps in the parquet floor. The bed posts ended exactly with them. This is no longer the case. The carpet in the corridor is the same. Between the eighth and the ninth floorboard, seen from my bedroom door, the carpet began. This morning, the end was right at the gap of the ninth. I went back to make sure.”

“But a carpet can sometimes slip,” Pete said to consider. “Especially on a smooth wooden floor.”

Mrs Hazelwood shook her head. “For this reason, the runner is attached to the floor with double-sided tape. Even today. I’ve checked that.”

“Strange,” muttered Jupiter. “And what was that about the cupboard in the bathroom?”

“It’s right next to the sink between the fourth and the eleventh floor tile. When brushing my teeth, I often bumped my left little toe against the edge of the right side wall. Last night it was no longer on the eleventh tile, but on the tenth.”

The First Investigator started thinking. He scratched his chin in a thoughtful manner.

“Have you told Laura about this?” Meanwhile, Bob tried to find out. “After all, it could be that she moved the furniture and the carpet unintentionally while cleaning the house.”

“I would have known something of that. I’m in the house 24 hours a day. Besides, there hasn’t been any house cleaning as Laura was taking care of me.”

Restlessly Jupiter began to walk around the bedroom. “You are an extremely sensitive and attentive person, ma’am. I have only known you for a few days, but nevertheless I dare to claim that you do not miss the slightest detail due to your sensitive feeling. I’ll go even further—by losing your sight, you are able to notice things that are hidden from us who see. You have just given us a taste of that ability.”

“What are you getting at?” Mrs Hazelwood stroked her hair in embarrassment.

“I wonder why you doubt your perception? If the bathroom cabinet is no longer in the same place as before, then it is a fact and by no means a hallucination. I think...”

In the middle of the sentence Jupiter suddenly stopped. He had noticed a movement behind the slightly-opened bedroom door.

11. Accusations

When Jupiter jerked the door open, Mrs White let out a shrill scream. Mrs Hazelwood, Pete and Bob were ice-cold down their backs. The teacher screamed like a mad person and could hardly calm down.

The First Investigator first recovered from the horror. "Pull yourself together, Mrs White! Nothing happened. Pull yourself together!"

"How... how dare you frighten me like that!" Accusingly she pressed her pointed finger against his chest.

"You were listening at the door. You shouldn't be surprised." Jupiter looked into her eyes. "Is there a good reason for what you were doing?"

Breathlessly Laura came rushing by. "For goodness' sake, what happened?" She looked quickly into the bedroom. "Is anyone hurt?"

Meanwhile, Mrs Hazelwood had left her bed and wrapped herself in a bathrobe. "I demand an explanation. What's going on?"

"I only invited Mrs White in and told her that you were dining with the young gentlemen upstairs in the bedroom," Laura defended herself.

"Without even looking at me, she swept past me."

"You don't owe us an explanation, Laura. Mrs White does." The First Investigator folded his arms. "Now, please, ma'am. We're listening. Why did you eavesdrop on our conversation?"

"I don't need to say anything to you!" she peppered at Jupiter rudely. "I'll talk to Mrs Hazelwood about this in private." She paused in embarrassment. "I mean, of course, without anyone else present. I'm sorry, Janet, but my nerves have been shattered for several days."

"We can't help it," Laura interjected. "Maybe it's just the weather. You suffocate in this heat. It's cloudy outside. I think there'll be a thunderstorm soon."

"We have to wait for that," predicted Mrs Hazelwood. "There is much more to come before then."

Then she turned to Mrs White. "I have no secrets from Laura and the three boys, Jennifer. You can speak freely."

"I'd feel very uncomfortable about it, Janet," Mrs White said.

Laura laughed. "Then it must be me or the boys! Don't be shy, Mrs White. Say whatever you want to say."

"All right." Nervously, the teacher fumbled with her pearl necklace. "I wasn't listening at the door. I just didn't want to barge in, because I could tell from the scraps of conversation that something important was at stake. I understood only a few words, without the slightest connection. You must believe me, Janet. I had just decided to knock. At that moment, this boy broke down the door and frightened me almost to death!"

"What did you want to talk to me about, Jennifer?" Breathing through her mouth, Mrs Hazelwood was waiting for an answer.

"I am extremely sorry for all concerned. But I've been thinking all day about the disappearance of my wallet. Whichever way you look at it, it all leads to one conclusion—I lost it in this house. There can be no mistake. And since, apart from you, Janet, there was only Laura and those three rascals in the house at the time, one of the four must have snatched it."

Stunned, Laura stood up in front of the teacher. "If you don't apologize for this insolence right now, I'm going to punch you in the face for your accusation! I mean it." She raised her hand in threat.

"You'll be facing assault and battery charges." Mrs White was not intimidated in the slightest. "I'll give the culprit twenty-four hours to think." She took one look at her watch. "I live at number 63 Rosebank Road in Santa Barbara. If the wallet arrives in my mailbox before the deadline, the thief will save him or herself and everyone here a lot of trouble. I don't think I need to go into any more detail about what that means."

The housekeeper pulled a face. "Spare us the details. We've all seen enough crime stories on TV. With your permission, ma'am, I'll get back to my work." She entered the bedroom and after a few seconds walked out with a loaded tray. "Shall I show you to the door, Mrs White?"

With a snappy sound and without saying goodbye, the teacher hurried down the stairs. This time, she let the front door slam behind her.

Jupiter waited until Laura had disappeared into the kitchen. Then he poked Mrs Hazelwood in the arm. "Is everything all right, ma'am?"

"What kind of question is that, young man. Now everything seems to be getting out of hand if Jennifer calls the police on any of us. I have been a student with her for the longest time. All right, that's enough! I wonder if she'll come to her senses."

“I couldn’t care less,” Pete replied brusquely. “I have nothing to blame myself for.”

“We’d better deal with the question I asked you earlier, ma’am,” the First Investigator recalled to consciousness. “You have not yet given me an answer.”

“I have to lie down again. But you’re welcome to keep me company for a while.” With small steps she staggered back to her bed. She settled down moaning. “So, what did you want to know?”

“The facts indicate that some of the furniture in this house has been moved for no apparent reason. I ask you, why do you assume that hallucinations have occurred and not consider that human intervention was involved?”

“Because I should have realized,” said Mrs Hazelwood. “Admittedly, this mosquito bite did a lot of damage to me—I was like in a twilight state. But still I had a light sleep. If a feather falls to the ground next to my bed, I wake up immediately. But I didn’t hear anything and didn’t feel anything either and yet my bed shifted while I was lying in it. Just look at it. The frame is made of solid oak. If you pulled it across the floor, you would hear it all over the house.”

The First Investigator approached the bed. “Do you mind if I try it?”

The lady agreed. Then Jupiter grabbed the edge of the bed at the foot end and pulled with all his strength. It squeaked and rumbled, although he had moved the bed only a few centimetres.

“I have to admit, even I would have woken up from that although I sleep like a rock.” Bob suspiciously raised his eyebrows. “It’s a very strange thing.”

Pete shivered. “Creepy is a more appropriate term. What’s going on in this house?”

“What if I am imagining things?” Mrs Hazelwood doubted. “What if I only imagine that the bed posts are positioned with the gaps in the parquet flooring. That would be proof that the parasites have already got into my body and I’m going mad.”

The First Investigator looked at his friends briefly. Then he set himself up in full view of Mrs Hazelwood’s bed. “I have no doubt for a moment about your mental state, ma’am. Something is going on here that is not quite right. Surely you remember that Pete, Bob and I are a detective team. If you don’t mind, we offer to clear up the mysterious events in this house.”

“You really mean that, don’t you?” Mrs Hazelwood pressed her lips together in resignation. “Have you gone over your friends’ heads again with this offer, or are you all agreed on this?”

“Our motto is ‘We Investigate Anything’,” Bob quoted the slogan on their business card. “Jupiter may be pigheaded, but when it comes to solving a case, we are usually agreeable to do it.”

Mrs Hazelwood adjusted her glasses. “And what is the first thing you intend to do in this case?”

“To answer a question with a counter-question,” Jupiter decided. “How long did Mrs White search your house yesterday for the wallet after we met?”

A quick twitch went through her face. “I can guess why you want to know this. But this question frightens me.”

“How long did the teacher look around here?” Jupiter repeated impatiently. “And which rooms was she in?”

“I honestly don’t remember that much about it. My full attention was on the mosquito bite. You have to understand that. But wait... Wait... if I could recall... She was looking in the hall... in the kitchen... then in the library... and then in the bathroom. At which point you left my house.”

“Excellent, ma’am,” praised Bob. “Then where did Mrs White go from there?”

“I think... in the broom closet.” Mrs Hazelwood faltered. “Strange. Then she went back upstairs.”

“Did you notice which room?” Jupe asked curiously.

Feverishly the lady concentrated on yesterday’s situation. “No, impossible. For I went back to the kitchen to clear the table. She was up there a minute at most.”

“Jupe, you think Mrs White moved the furniture and the rug?” The Second Investigator scratched his head. “What sense would that make?”

“I don’t have a plausible answer for that yet,” Jupiter had to admit. “However, we can assume with absolute certainty that Mrs White did not look for her wallet in the said places. I even dare to suggest that she has not lost it at all.”

“One moment,” Mrs Hazelwood interrupted Jupiter’s train of thought. “I can understand that you do not like the teacher too much, especially as she accuses you of stealing. But what you are doing is in no way inferior to her thinking. Fight fire with fire—that’s what they call it. Each one suspects the other. Besides, your unacceptable accusation proves to me

that once again you didn't listen to me carefully. A detective should not escape attention."

"And what would that be?" Jupiter asked angrily. He didn't like it at all when someone questioned his conclusions.

"Mrs White went into the rooms upstairs, that is correct." Mrs Hazelwood put her dark glasses back in place. "But at this time, as I said earlier, I was in the kitchen. My bed, however, had been moved while I was lying on it. It is therefore highly questionable whether she was responsible for what happened."

"Yes, ma'am," Jupiter admitted. "It remains to be seen why she went upstairs a second time."

Mrs Hazelwood triumphed. "It is easy to find out. All I have to do is ask her. I'll call her later. It's too early now. She won't be home yet."

"I look forward to your reply." Bob drummed restlessly with his fingers on the bed post. "I'm gonna take a quick look in the bathroom, fellas, and check out the cupboard. Let's see how easy it is to move." He left the bedroom in a hurry.

"I just remembered something," Mrs Hazelwood recalled in a low voice. "Jennifer suspected you and Laura of stealing the wallet, as you were the only ones in the house, besides me, at the time she claimed she lost the wallet. That's not entirely true."

"What do you mean?" Pete questioned.

"Mr Collins was here if only for ten minutes," the lady said.

Jupiter's ears were wide open. "Who is Mr Collins?"

"The beekeeper who removed the hornet nest from the garden shed. He came here the next day because he had forgotten the insect that was still trapped under the toothbrush glass in the bathroom. He came all this way again, just to bring the one hornet back to its nest. A strange kind of love of animals." Mrs Hazelwood shook herself. "I assumed that this insect under the glass had already starved to death or suffocated. But far from it. These creatures are tough."

"Was this Mr Collins up here too?" Pete reassured himself.

"Indeed. He seemed very enthusiastic about the interior design of this house. He was particularly taken with the hall with its two marble pillars. He asked me for a small tour of the rooms. I did not refuse him this request." Mrs Hazelwood leaned on the mattress. "What do you think? Did he take Jennifer's wallet?"

The First Investigator did not allow himself to be led to a hasty statement after Mrs Hazelwood's reprimand. "I would have to see this man personally to be able to make a judgement."

"Nothing stands in the way of that." From memory, the lady gave them the beekeeper's address and phone number.

"If it's convenient for your investigation, pay him a visit. I can't imagine he's got anything on him, though. His nature seemed trustworthy and inspiring."

Footsteps approached in the corridor. Soon after Bob entered the bedroom. "Moving the cupboard in the bathroom is no great problem, fellas. Even a small child could do it. The cupboard almost slides over the floor tiles."

Downstairs in the hall, the vacuum cleaner was switched on.

Jupiter turned to Mrs Hazelwood. "Are you sure Laura didn't move the furniture? I mean, did you ask her?"

"I have agreed with Laura that she is not to make any unauthorized changes in this house—no matter how small a change it may seem to her. Even if she put one pair of scissors somewhere else, I would spend hours looking for them. After all, I am blind."

"Have you asked her anyway, ma'am?" Jupiter insisted on his question.

The lady denied and defiantly pushed the blanket aside. "No, but I'll do that right now."

She slipped into her slippers and stepped out into the hall.

"Laura!" she tried to drown out the roar of the vacuum cleaner. "Laura!"

The noise from the machine died away instantly. "You called? Coming, ma'am!"

A few seconds later, the housekeeper hurried into the bedroom. "Do you need something, ma'am?"

"I'm only asking for information. Since you were hired here in the house, have you moved my bed, moved around the bathroom cupboard, or moved the carpet elsewhere?"

"Why would I do that?" she rebelled. "You have expressly forbid me to do so!"

"Don't get upset, it was just a question." Mrs Hazelwood sat down at the table.

The housekeeper put her arms on her hips. “I can tell you who is responsible, ma’am. I’m just surprised you haven’t thought of it yourself. Mrs White, that insufferable woman, turned half the house upside down looking for her wallet. I wouldn’t be surprised if she wasn’t snooping around in your private affairs. I’m sorry to voice these suspicions, but it seems to me to be more than reasonable.”

“It’s okay, Laura. You can go back to work.” Mrs Hazelwood pointed to the door.

“Understood, ma’am.” The housekeeper gritted her teeth. She was just leaving the room when her eyes widened and fixed on the open window.

Jupiter followed her gaze. What he saw surprised him. In the bedroom, barely visible on the mosquito net, sat three fat mosquitoes.

Suddenly, one of them flew aggressively at Mrs Hazelwood’s face!

12. Aversion

What happened now happened so quickly that The Three Investigators and Laura could hardly follow it with their eyes. In a flash, Mrs Hazelwood's right hand shot up and slapped on her face. "Gotcha!" With pointed fingers, the lady pulled a tissue paper from a cardboard box and used it to clean her hands.

Now Laura leapt towards the window in one bound. She closed it with such a jerk that the window vibrated. Relieved, she breathed again. "They'll never get in here again."

Jupiter took the tissue from Mrs Hazelwood and looked closely at the remains of the mosquito that bit her. Carefully he loosely folded the tissue paper and held on to it.

Meanwhile, Bob walked closer to the window and inspected the mosquito net. The two mosquitoes that were now trapped between the window pane and the mosquito net were looking for a way out, flapping their wings.

"How many are there?" Mrs Hazelwood enquired excitedly. Immediately her knees began to tremble. "Answer me."

"Don't worry, ma'am, just two." Laura tried to give her voice a secure tone. "They are trapped by the mosquito net."

"Where is the insect spray?" Mrs Hazelwood moved to the far corner of the bedroom. "I can't find a moment's peace without that can! Bring it to me! Hurry up!"

Without argument, Laura left the room. When she returned, she handed Mrs Hazelwood an aerosol can. With a quick grip she loosened the lid and pressed on the nozzle. A foggy jet spread through the bedroom.

Jupiter, Pete and Bob stormed into the corridor. Laura followed as she rubbed her watery eyes with her hand. "This stuff is highly toxic."

"I don't care!" Coughing, the lady appeared in the doorway. "As long as I can keep the critters away. Let's hope they're not immune to this chemical."

Pete pulled a paper handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to the housekeeper. "Here, Laura. Your eyes look like you've been chopping

onions for an army.”

Gratefully she dabbed her tears. “Ma’am! Next time, please give me a warning before you spray that stuff!”

“I couldn’t control myself anymore. I apologize.” Mrs Hazelwood closed the bedroom door and coughing and clutching her throat. “What guarantee do I have that there aren’t more greedy bloodsuckers lurking about? Whether it’s the mosquitoes that kill me or the bug spray, what difference does it make?”

Pete raised his voice accusingly. “While I fully understand your situation, but you shouldn’t jeopardize our health any further. I love living and I want to live to be a hundred years old.”

“At least,” Bob agreed. In doing so, he watched as Mrs Hazelwood opened the opposite door in the corridor.

“I’ll be staying in the guest room tonight, Laura—the room that I actually intended for you. But you prefer to stay in your apartment and pay a lot of rent. Santa Monica is an expensive place.”

Laura put her arms on her hips. “I feel at home in Santa Monica. It’s a bit off the beaten track, but I’m a creature of habit. I’ve lived there for ten years. I’ve grown very fond of the area. I also sing in the gospel choir there every week. The church is only a stone’s throw from my apartment.”

“Well, you know what’s best for yourself,” Mrs Hazelwood replied curtly. “Anyway, I’ll be staying here tonight. Provided there are no flying bugs hiding inside. I’m putting you in charge of that, Laura.”

“With your permission, ma’am, I would like to finish vacuuming downstairs. Then I’ll look into the guest room.”

When the housekeeper had left, Jupiter thoughtfully pinched his lower lip. Pete knew this habit of his friend only too well. “Well, Jupe, what are you thinking about?”

The First Investigator made a detailed examination of the spray can in Mrs Hazelwood’s hand. “Would you mind telling me how long you’ve been using this insect spray?”

“Do you mean this particular can here?” She straightened her glasses. “Or what is the meaning of the question?”

“Let me ask you another way,” Jupiter said. “Have you been spraying insecticides in this house for a long time or is it a relatively new habit of yours?”

Mrs Hazelwood trimmed. “Funny you should ask. One might almost think you were psychic. Until a few days ago, I was a staunch opponent of

such toxic chemicals, despite my phobia of insects. After all, our environment is polluted enough with toxins already. Besides, I've been spared mosquito bites so far. My body odour or my blood type seems to have kept the mosquitoes from biting me so far. But since Laura was attacked by the hornets and since she reported on the dangerous pathogens that mosquitoes transmit to humans, these bloodsuckers seem to have changed their behaviour. Anyway, to answer your question precisely—this is the first insect spray I have purchased in my life.”

“You’ve already told us about your insect phobia,” the First Investigator added as an explanation. “Since childhood, you have suffered from it. But it was only when Laura overheard the doctors talking at the hospital that you felt the need to put mosquito nets in your house.”

“That is undoubtedly true.” Nervously, the lady moved the aerosol can from one hand to the other.

“I am neither a clairvoyant nor able to read other people’s minds,” Jupiter explained calmly. “I simply call it logical deduction. Since you miscalculated a bit in the dose of the spray can earlier—because nobody voluntarily gives herself such a coughing fit—I concluded that dealing with this kind of insect spray must be relatively foreign to you. You confirmed that. Moreover, any reasonable person would protect oneself in the house against mosquitoes with mosquito nets instead of contaminating his rooms with a cloud of poison.”

“That’s what I did,” Mrs Hazelwood defended her actions vehemently. “But those critters invaded my house in spite of the nets and attacked me!”

“Although you have always been spared mosquito bites, as you said earlier.” Bob blew into his T-shirt. The oppressive humidity was giving him a lot of trouble. He was sweating all over his body.

“Couldn’t it be that the mosquitoes were already in the house before we installed the nets,” Pete tried to clarify the situation.

“Perhaps.” Mrs Hazelwood pointed to the can in her hand. “I had preferred the mosquito nets and only use this insect spray if I had to, like just now.”

Jupiter then took out his handkerchief and said: “With your permission, Mrs Hazelwood, I need to go back into the bedroom and take the remains of the two mosquitoes trapped in the net.”

“Do what you need to do,” the lady replied.

With that, Jupiter pressed the handkerchief against his nose, opened the bedroom door and went towards the window. The insecticide had

already taken effect. He got a piece of tissue paper and carefully took the placed the two mosquitoes onto it, and went back out to the corridor.

“Who knows about your phobia of insects, ma’am?” asked the First Investigator bluntly.

“Jupe, you don’t think that someone brought the mosquitoes into the house on purpose,” Pete asked incredulously.

Mrs Hazelwood began to whisper. “That’s impossible. Stop contemplating such terrible things.”

“Nothing is impossible, ma’am.” Jupiter also lowered his voice.

“But in this case you are mistaken,” Mrs Hazelwood said. “I’ve never spoken to anyone about my morbid aversion... except my husband. But he’s already in the ground.”

“What about Mrs White?” Jupiter asked.

“No, not a word about it. I must disappoint you, Jupiter. If you think that someone intends to deliberately expose me to terror, you’re on the wrong track. In my life I have not only devoured non-fiction, but also a lot of crime novels. If someone would take the trouble to play with my fear, there must be an intention behind it. A financial gain, for example. In this case, my house or savings.

“But neither is worth mentioning. I already told you, Gill has gambled away most of my money. I could only live here with the pension I receive because of my disability. And this house will go into the bank’s ownership when I die. You see, I’m not worth ripping off.”

“That is what needs to be cleared up next, ma’am,” Jupiter said encouragingly. “Since you are insistent on not going to check whether you were really infected by a mosquito, there is still a way to bring light into this matter. I think that my approach is promising!”

13. Revelations

Dr Charles Woolley was an entomologist. Some time ago The Three Investigators had met him some years ago in Chaparral Canyon, not far from the coastal town of San Fernando Valley. Immediately after their visit to Mrs Hazelwood, Jupiter had contacted him by telephone and made an appointment for the following afternoon. In the meantime, Pete and Bob were to clarify two further questions, which Jupiter felt were urgently needed to be answered in order to make some progress in Mrs Hazelwood's case.

The sultriness was still unbearably oppressive when the bus stopped at the bus stop directly in front of the researcher's house. Groaning, the First Investigator got off the bus and, passing a cornfield, approached the front door on a narrow gravel path. He was about to ring the doorbell when a cellar hatch opened next to the front stairs. From the shaft, a man climbed to the surface. He was in his mid-forties, bald, muscular, suntanned, and wore thick-lensed glasses. He greeted his visitor beaming with joy.

"Jupiter! You haven't changed much! Nice of you to visit me!"

"Dr Woolley!" The First Investigator reached out his hand to the scientist. Jupiter's other hand held a small plastic box, in which contained two loosely folded tissue papers.

A few minutes later, the box was on the desk of the scientist's laboratory. Jupiter was fascinated by the many terrariums where thousands of different insects were kept. He then told Dr Woolley what had happened in Mrs Hazelwood's house over the past few days.

The insect researcher took out the two tissue papers and carefully unfolded it with interest. The first tissue contained the squashed mosquito that bit Mrs Hazelwood, and the second contained the two intact ones that Laura had locked between the window and mosquito net.

When the First Investigator finished his report, Dr Woolley shook his head in disbelief.

"I've heard the strangest things in my life and have done my own research, but what you're telling me, I find rather questionable."

“In what way?” Jupiter enquired curiously. He thought highly of Dr Woolley.

“Where to start?” The entomologist removed a large magnifying glass from the desk drawer. And he looked at the two insects more closely. “You know my interest is more in ants. But I also studied mosquitoes in my student days. Especially the females, which can be easily distinguished from the males visually.”

He handed Jupiter the magnifying glass and used a pair of tweezers to carefully turn the two intact mosquitoes. “These are mosquitoes you have here. You see in it a female and a male. The mosquito lady’s antennae look hairy enough, but the male’s are even bushier. So you can easily tell them apart.”

Then Dr Woolley pointed to the first tissue. “And look at the squashed one over here... Clearly it is a female of the same species as the other two.”

The First Investigator compared them and nodded decisively. “I have also looked at several insect guides, Dr Woolley, especially those that causes diseases. I’m a bit confused here. As I found out, the so-called sleeping sickness is caused by the tsetse fly—which is not a mosquito.”

The entomologist put the specimens back into the box and walked over to a counter. “The three main species of mosquitoes that are responsible for the spread of diseases are the Anopheles, Culex and Aedes, and none of them look like the ones you have here. If you are talking about the sleeping sickness, yes, it is known to be caused by the tsetse fly, and what you have here is not it.

“And now you want to know from me whether your client was indeed infected by this species or whether her imagination was playing a trick on her.”

Bob wiped his damp forehead. Even in the building of the *Los Angeles Times*, the daily newspaper where his father worked as a journalist, the air conditioning could not cope with the high humidity.

Bob sat in the archive in front of a computer monitor and combed through the newspaper articles that had been published since August last year. Again and again, his eyes caught sight of curious reports that had occurred in every imaginable place on earth during that period.

Most amusing to him was an article about a fat man in New York who had eaten so much that he could not fit through the door and had to be

lifted out of the balcony door by a crane. Secretly he had to think of Jupiter. Should he print out this article and hand it to him as a warning? After all, the First Investigator also had an enormous weight, but eventually he decided to spare him this humiliation.

Suddenly his eyes slipped to the left column to a report entitled 'Fatal Accident on Shadow Road'. Immediately Bob forgot his intention and skimmed over the report:

On the night of the 11 August, a dramatic traffic accident occurred on the Shadow Road highway at the corner of Milton Drive, resulting in a fatality. A Volkswagen Beetle crashed into a tanker truck that had broken down with an engine failure in the right lane. The driver of the Beetle succumbed to his injuries while still on the scene. An examination of the car revealed that the left windshield wiper was not functional. According to the investigations, this was the reason why the Beetle driver could not see the obstacle in time. The heavy rain shower that night made a clear view impossible under these circumstances.

Bob trimmed. Then he skimmed through the message a second time.

"Well, young man? Still busy?" Startled, Bob turned around. "Gee, Susan, you scared me!"

In the doorway stood a young trainee, who had been introduced to journalistic work by Mr Andrews for several weeks. In her hand, she was holding a lemonade bottle. "I wanted to bring you some cool refreshment. This oppressive heat is terrible."

Bob gratefully accepted the drink and put it to his lips. "Say, Susan, could you tell me where I could get a map of Los Angeles? I came across something that's got me stumped."

Pete got out of his MG and stopped in surprise. He narrowed his eyes. Then he looked again. The figure that stood there in the garden and slowly approached him looked quite strange. He was dressed in a wide white overall, wore thick gloves that reached to his elbows, and a hat with a wide brim sat on his head. A dark green veil hung from it, covering the entire head.

“Uh, excuse me...” the Second Investigator stammered insecurely. “I wonder if you could help me. I’m looking for a Mr Collins. Edward Collins. The figure stopped and struck his hat from his head. The face of a young man appeared, his tanned skin suggesting that he spent a lot of time outdoors.”

“I am Edward Collins. What can I do for you?”

Pete entered the garden. “Forgive me for staring at you like that but your attire was a little strange to me. In retrospect, it is perfectly logical, since you are a beekeeper.”

“The bees are my friends. Still, one cannot be too careful. That’s why I wear these protective clothes.” Mr Collins took off his gloves. “Well, where’s the fire?”

“My name is Pete Crenshaw. You came to a friend of ours a few days ago to relocate a hornet nest.”

“Right. Mrs Hazelwood, if I remember correctly. What seems to be the trouble? Has she discovered another nest on her property?”

The Second Investigator waved. “Fortunately not. We’re more interested in what made you pull out the slats on the back wall of the garden shed. Did you suspect there was another hornet nest in the wall cavity?”

The beekeeper blinked and then frowned. “What? Wait a minute... That’s not what happened!”

Pete kept his mouth opened in surprise.

14. Suspicions

“Court is now in session!” The First Investigator knocked on the table in the trailer with a bottle opener. He looked at his two friends expectantly. Pete and Bob caught his gaze, but they remained silent.

“Have your investigations left you speechless, or how may I interpret your silence?” Irritated, Jupe dropped the bottle opener on the table top.

“No, Jupe,” Bob said. “We wonder why we should always tell you our findings first, while you usually keep your information to yourself until later, especially when you plan to make a dramatic announcement.”

“Exactly,” Pete agreed. “For once today, it’s your turn to give us news first, then Bob and I will let the cat out of the bag.”

Jupiter acted as if he would not be provoked in the slightest by these statements. Nevertheless, it was difficult for him to appear calm.

“Okay. Why not?” Restlessly, his fingers drummed on the back of the chair. “

“If you remember, Laura said that the doctors at the hospital were talking about a dangerous sleeping sickness that is caused by an unknown parasite transmitted by mosquitoes. Firstly, what is known about the so-called sleeping sickness is that it is indeed a parasitic disease transmitted by the bite of an infected tsetse fly, and a tsetse fly is not a mosquito. The disease is commonly known as a sleeping sickness because symptoms can include a disturbed sleep pattern. Without treatment, an infection can cause fatality.

“Secondly, Dr Woolley is not aware of mosquitoes causing a similar sleeping sickness, and he cannot be too sure about this as he specializes in studying ants. However, he did say that even if a mosquito can cause such a disease, the chance of being infected by one is almost a thousand times less than the chance of scoring a jackpot.”

“But it’s not impossible?” Pete wondered sceptically.

“Dr Woolley confirmed what Bob found out earlier that a mosquito must first have bitten an infected person before it can infect the next person with another bite. And if you consider that people suffering from sleeping sickness are immediately quarantined in our country, that is,

transferred to isolation wards in hospitals, that means that the probability of transmission is reduced even more.

“Therefore it is pure quibbling, friends. I am putting my hand in the fire for the fact that Mrs Hazelwood’s mosquito bite is as harmless as a sip of sour milk. Whatever she suffers, a mosquito is not responsible.”

“What does that mean, Jupe?” Bob asked me curiously.

“There is a puzzle for us to solve,” Jupe said.

“Not just one. What I have learned from Mr Collins today raises further questions.” Pete stroked a strand of hair from his face. “You will hardly believe it, but the beekeeper stiffly claims he did not pull out the slats on the back wall of the garden shed, as Mrs Hazelwood thought. According to him, the hornet nest was at the hose reel as Laura said, and that the back wall was intact when he removed the nest. He did not pull any slats out.”

“I don’t understand that. Then who pulled out the slats and why?” Bob nervously polished the lenses of his sunglasses with a corner of his T-shirt.

“That’s just it,” Pete confirmed. “If I remembered correctly, Mrs Hazelwood said that Mr Collins probably pulled out the slats to check for hornets breeding elsewhere. I believe that she didn’t know, or didn’t really care for that matter.”

“So if Mr Collins is correct, then the slats were pulled out after the hornet nest was removed.” Jupiter slid restlessly back and forth in his chair. “The first time we went into the shed was two days after the nest was removed. There was enough time for just about anyone to go in there and pull out the slats. Because besides Mr Collins and Laura, there is someone else haunting my mind.”

“You’re talking about Mrs White?” Pete reassured himself.

“Right. Mrs Hazelwood’s Braille teacher.” Jupe said. “The person who, for reasons I can’t understand, looked for her wallet all over the house and still couldn’t find it. Frankly, I don’t think she is looking for her wallet, but something else.”

Bob was on fire. “Not to mention her eavesdropping at the bedroom door! Not to mention her unfounded suspicions. In my opinion, she is suspect number one!”

“Suspect number one—fair enough, Bob.” Pete thoughtfully scratched his chin. “The only question is: ‘What is she involved in?’”

“It’s pretty obvious. Something is very wrong in Mrs Hazelwood’s house,” Bob said. “Our client’s dark premonitions suddenly seem to be

coming true—furniture goes mad, mosquitoes bite, and time and again Mrs White appears on the scene, giving us one flimsy reason after another for her presence. But there is another unanswered question in this case...”

“Are you talking about something you found at the newspaper archives?” Jupiter asked.

“Yes, I do.” Bob slid closer to the table. “If memory serves me correctly, Mrs Hazelwood assumed that on the night of his death, her husband spent the entire evening at the Joker-Luck Casino in Santa Monica.”

“That is correct,” Jupe confirmed. “Have you learned anything else?”

“How to take it. From the newspaper article of 12 August, it is clear that Gill crashed in his Beetle on the Shadow Road highway, corner of Milton Drive. This intersection is in the north of Santa Monica... but the casino is on the south side of town.”

Pete made a long face. “Excuse me, buddy, I’m kind of confused. What are you trying to tell us?”

“That Gill Hazelwood could have been anywhere that night,” Jupe gave the answer, “but most likely not at the Joker-Luck Casino. I happen to know the location of the gambling den. It’s about half an hour’s drive from Mrs Hazelwood’s house.

“However, the Shadow Road section of the highway, on the corner of Milton Drive, is on the other side of town, about ninety minutes from Mrs Hazelwood’s house. So Mr Gill Hazelwood would have taken a huge detour, which I think lacks any logic.”

Bob jumped out of his chair and stood up in front of his friends. “Things are getting very confusing, fellas. No piece of the puzzle fits the other. Let’s recap, shall we?

“Ten years ago, Janet Hazelwood married her husband Gill. He comes from a modest background and gambles away her money year after year at the Joker-Luck Casino. Despite her deep love for him, Mrs Hazelwood decided to divorce him on 10 August last year. But she waited in vain for his return from the gambling house. Gill was killed in a car crash on Shadow Road and Milton Drive. As we now know, it is highly unlikely that he was even at the casino that night. He must have been somewhere else before the accident, as the route does not make any sense.

“In any case, six months later, Mrs Hazelwood went blind. Fate, unable to read any more books, made her decide to sell her entire library. That’s when we come into the picture. It was at this very moment that

Laura, who had only taken up her duties a few days earlier, was attacked by hornets in the garden shed. While the housekeeper was at the hospital, Mrs Hazelwood had the beekeeper, Mr Collins, remove the nest.

“The next day, the lady asked us to put mosquito nets around her house because Laura overheard a conversation between two doctors about a sleeping sickness caused by an unknown parasite transmitted by mosquitoes.”

“That’s right, Bob,” Jupiter took over the summation. “It is conspicuous that Mrs Hazelwood was bitten by a mosquito that same day, although she seemed immune to mosquito bites up to that point. She then complained of nausea and fatigue. Stubborn and because she has lost confidence in the doctors, she vehemently refuses to be examined.”

“When inspecting the garden shed, we discovered freshly torn out slats on the back wall, an act for which we do not know who is responsible for,” Pete continued. “Laura and Mr Collins both said that the hornet nest was at the hose reel. In addition, Mr Collins claimed that when he removed the nest, the back wall was intact and he did not pull down any slats.

“As if these incidents were not mysterious enough, Mrs Hazelwood found that the furniture in her house moved without any explainable cause. In addition, more mosquitoes entered her bedroom despite having mosquito nets installed.”

Jupe took a deep breath. “I’ve been thinking back and forth. The fact remains for me that someone is searching Mrs Hazelwood’s property for something. There’s no other explanation for the moved furniture and the carpet and the torn out slats in the garden shed.”

“The funny thing is that every person in the game had access to Mrs Hazelwood’s house,” Pete added. “Apart from the owner and Laura, Mrs White and Mr Collins also looked around suspiciously. Remember, the beekeeper came back the next day and asked Mrs Hazelwood show him around the premises.”

“Fellas.” Bob felt anxiety rising within himself. “It may sound far-fetched, but I was just thinking about Mrs Hazelwood telling us that her husband visited the casino the night he died.”

“What are you thinking about?” asked Jupiter.

“She should know the location of the casino. After all, it was his regular casino,” Bob said. “Furthermore, we can assume that the accident site where Gill died is also known to her.”

“What are you driving at?” Pete urged. “Don’t let every word come out of your nose.”

“Mrs Hazelwood is a clever person,” Bob said. “She too must have noticed that the casino and the accident site are in two completely different places. I wonder if she is trying to hide that fact from us. Perhaps she has something to hide from us—something which we should not know at all costs!”

15. Guilt

It was exactly 5:58 pm that day when The Three Investigators rang Mrs Hazelwood's doorbell. One could have assumed that the oppressive humidity had reached its peak, but it was still rising.

Once again Bob pushed the doorbell button. But even after shouting several times there was no movement in the house.

"Is she sleeping again?" Jupiter knocked at the door energetically. "Mrs Hazelwood!"

Pete listened. Then he raised his shoulders in resignation. "We should have announced ourselves by phone... then we wouldn't have had to come all this way."

"I wonder if Laura has left work yet," Bob wondered. "Maybe she's out shopping."

"It's possible, Bob. Maybe we should—" Jupiter abruptly broke off.

A loud clang sounded from inside the house. It sounded as if a vase had been broken. After that, everything remained silent. The First Investigator did not hesitate for long and pressed the bell several times.

"Mrs Hazelwood! Mrs Hazelwood, is that you? What happened?" There was still no answer. "Pete, Bob! Run around the house and see if there's any windows open. We have to get in there! Something's going on in there!"

The Three Investigators split up. Pete ran around the house on the left and Bob on the right, while Jupiter stayed on guard at the front door. Once more he knocked and shouted in vain.

"Forget it, Jupe!" Bob returned, gasping. "All windows are closed!"

"Then Pete must help us!" Jupiter cried.

The Second Investigator rushed in and acted immediately. From his pocket, Pete pulled out his black case containing lock picks, with which he immediately took on the door lock. Within seconds the lock clicked and the entrance door was open.

"Mrs Hazelwood!" Jupiter hurried into the hall and stopped in front of a pile of broken glass. On the floor, the bulbous vase, which had recently

been enthroned on the left-hand marble column, lay in hundreds of shards. Pete went pale.

“Did something happen to her?” He formed his hands into a funnel. “Mrs Hazelwood! Where are you!”

Bob took a quick look into the kitchen, then he ripped open the bathroom door. There was no one around. “Upstairs, fellas!”

On the double, The Three Investigators ran upstairs. The door to the bedroom was open. Jupiter ran in and stood there frozen. Pete pressed his hand to his mouth in horror.

“Oh, my goodness!” Bob slowly approached the bed. Mrs Hazelwood lay against the mattress with her upper body hanging over the side, her head and stringy hair almost touching the floor. Her eyes were closed while her parched mouth was wide open.

Pete began to shiver. “Is... Is she dead?”

Bob felt her pulse and took a deep breath of relief.

At that moment, downstairs in the hall, the front door slammed shut. On impulse, Pete broke free of his paralysis, dashed out of the bedroom and down the stairs. Together with Bob, Jupiter brought the lady back into a reasonable position on the bed.

“Mrs Hazelwood! Can you hear me? Wake up!” Jupiter cried.

“Jupe, it’s strange. No person can sleep so soundly!” Bob started shaking her gently. Her body lay limp in the mattress well. She didn’t move. “Mrs Hazelwood, wake up!”

“If she doesn’t wake up soon, we’ll have to call the doctor!” Jupiter said.

At this keyword, the corners of the lady’s mouth began to twitch slightly. “No doctor... please don’t...”

“Mrs Hazelwood! What’s happened? What’s the matter with you?” Jupiter spoke loudly and insistently.

“Gill... please don’t leave me...” She threw her head from one side of the pillow to the other. “I feel guilty... I want to make up for my mistake... Please stay with me...”

“Are these fever fantasies, Jupe?” Bob asked anxiously, “I’m not sure. Maybe she’s still dreaming. Mrs Hazelwood, you have to wake up. It’s us! Jupiter and Bob! Come to your senses!”

Slowly her hand groped for the night cabinet. On top of it lay the dark glasses. After she had put them on, she tried to sit up. But her strength was not enough.

"I... I feel so dim in my head," Mrs Hazelwood stammered.

"You must have slept pretty soundly, ma'am," Bob said. "At first, we thought you were dead."

"Not charming, Bob, but at least honest." The lady took his hand.

At that moment, Pete hurried into the room, out of breath. "Whoever it was, fellas, that person got away from me!"

"What are you talking about?" Mrs Hazelwood fixed her glasses.

"Is Laura off work yet?" Jupiter beat the Second Investigator to it.

"What time is it?" Mrs Hazelwood asked.

Bob took a quick look at his watch. "It's a little after 6 pm, ma'am."

"Then I slept for a really long time." Yawning, she stretched out her arms. "Laura's shift lasted until 3 pm. I had gone to bed at about 4 pm. I felt as if I had been knocked out and fell asleep immediately. But who got away? Can you please tell me?"

Jupiter cleared his throat. "We rang your doorbell earlier, ma'am. But nobody opened it. Suddenly we heard a clang from the hall. When still no one answered, we managed to gain access to your house with a lock pick. We were terribly worried, you see."

Mrs Hazelwood waved it away. "You don't have to apologize. What happened next?"

"As we entered the hall, we saw the broken vase lying on the floor. Of course we looked downstairs immediately, but there was no one there," Jupiter said. "Then we rushed upstairs and found you here. At about that time, the front door slammed shut down. Someone was in your house earlier, ma'am. We must have frightened that person with our ringing. And he broke the vase on the marble pillar."

"I tried to catch the person but he gave me the slip," Pete added. "I wonder whether he came in to steal something."

"What could that be?" Mrs Hazelwood ran her hair through. "There is nothing in this house worth stealing."

"Who has a key to the front door?" Jupiter enquired.

"Besides Laura, only Jennifer."

"Mrs White?" Pete asked. "Do you consider her a close friend of yours?"

"First and foremost, she is my teacher. The key was for practical reasons at the time. At first I found it hard to cope with my blindness. Sometimes it took me a little longer to get to the front door, especially

when I was upstairs. So I gave her the key. Do you think she was the one who was hanging around here? What reason would she have for that?"

"We can only speculate, ma'am." Jupe's face lit up. "I would like to try an experiment. If it works, then we can then exclude some people from the suspect circle. Can you give me the telephone numbers of Mrs White, Mr. Collins and Laura?"

Bob gave a surprised whistle. "Genius, Jupe! The person who was just here in the house is unlikely to have returned to his home yet. If one of them picks up the phone, we can cross him or her off our list."

"But if there was an accomplice in the house a while ago, then we're gonna look pretty stupid," Pete said.

Jupiter was confident. "We can decide about that later, Pete. Nothing ventured, nothing gained!" The First Investigator realized that his idea was good. After a few minutes, he noted that it was unsuccessful as neither Mr Collins, nor Laura, nor Mrs White were home when he called them.

Mrs Hazelwood pushed her head into the pillow in a depressed state. "Give it up, boys. Whatever's going on here, I don't care. I don't even want to know anymore. If only these intense dreams would go away."

"Did you have a nightmare earlier?" Bob asked cautiously.

She nodded. "Gill appears more and more often in my dreams. Proudly he decorated the walls of his room with every imaginable coat of arms."

"Coat of arms?" Pete interrupted the lady. "What is that?"

Jupiter moaned. "The insignia of knights, noble or royal houses. Later also of states, cities and commoners."

"One would think you would have taken a closer look at heraldry, as you know your way around it," praised Mrs Hazelwood. "Gill, alas, was not so learned. It almost came to a great quarrel between us then. All because there was a letter in the mailbox from a shady book publisher who took advantage of our good faith."

Bob listened up. "Can you explain that in more detail?"

"The letter wanted to make us believe that the name 'Hazelwood' was based on a historical foundation discovered through research. The name supposedly came from a widely ramified noble family, back to the time of the crusaders. So Gill wanted to order the book entitled *Heraldry—The History of Coats of Arms* with his allegedly personal family coat of arms printed on the cover. It seemed to be worth the price of \$248 to him at that time. Probably he wanted to impress his friends with it. I couldn't

convince him that we were being swindled because the coat of arms on the cover was of course a pure fantasy design. His family had no noble ancestors. That's as good as certain."

"What happened next?" Pete wanted to know.

"Of course Gill got his wish. Sometimes he was like a little kid. I ordered him the book. When this magnificent book was sent to us a few weeks later, he had to admit that he had been caught in a scam. I'll never forget the look on his face.

"This 401-page so-called historical book naturally contained not a single word about his alleged noble descent. Sure, it did throw together illustrations of hundreds of other coats of arms and shields—beginning with the primitive heraldic pictures, on which only a rafter, a sloping beam or a stake was depicted, up to the coats of arms of the present. In my opinion, the book was not worth ten dollars. I laughed at Gill. After that, we never spoke a word about this matter again. That damn book nearly drove a wedge between us." She swallowed.

"I don't know why, but in my dreams, the feeling always comes back to me." A tear rolled down her cheek. "I wanted to divorce him even though my heart was attached to him. I can't shake off this guilt..."

"You have nothing to reproach yourself for, ma'am," Bob tried to appease the lady. But that didn't save her from a flood of tears.

"Please leave now. I want to be alone." She wiped her cheek with the blanket.

"And what of the intruder?" Pete asked insistently. "Shouldn't we check if he stole something after all?"

"We should respect Mrs Hazelwood's wishes, Pete." Jupiter turned to go. "So, ma'am, do not hesitate to call on us whenever there is need. You can always count on us."

The lady did not react and hid her face under the blanket.

As Jupiter stood in the doorway, his eyes fell on the photo of Mrs Hazelwood and her husband on the wall. Quietly, he grabbed it and quickly left the room.

16. Gathering

It was the next afternoon. For the third time, Pete had waved to the waitress in the ice cream parlour. After a coke and an orange soda, the waitress brought him a banana latte. Bob had only half finished his drink. Again and again, he threw a nervous glance at the front door.

“What’s keeping him?” Bob said restlessly. “Tardiness is a virtue unwanted in detective work.”

Pete stirred the straw in his milk. “Since when is tardiness a virtue? I would put it differently. It is simply an impertinence that our First Investigator is letting us wait here for almost an hour! As if we have nothing better to do than to sit here and wait for him!”

“Here I am, fellas!” Panting, Jupiter hurried into the shop. With a plop he settled down on the chair. “Sorry, it took a little longer. But I needed more time for it. Man, am I thirsty. Can I have a sip of your banana latte?”

Pete shoved the glass over his table. “Drink up. I ordered that drink anyway just out of boredom. We’ve been sitting here for over an hour!”

“Don’t get agitated, Pete!” Jupiter greedily sucked at straws. “Everything is set in motion! If all goes well, we’ll find out tonight in detail who and what is behind the strange happenings at the Hazelwood house! If you want to be there—and I insist, because without your help, important pieces of the puzzle would not have come into play. We must be there before 7 pm. The end of this operation is still to be decided. My guess is that it will be well after midnight. Since tomorrow is Sunday and we don’t have school, your parents shouldn’t mind if you stay at my place.”

Bob choked on his drink. “Have you solved this case on your own now? It almost sounds like it.”

“Take it easy,” Jupiter relented. “Nothing works without you two. That hasn’t changed at all and will be so into the future. I just did a little groundwork.”

“And you wouldn’t happen to want to fill us in on where you’ve been hanging out all afternoon, even though I gave you my banana latte?” Pete asked.

“There will be a little gathering at Mrs Hazelwood’s house at seven o’clock. Mr Collins, Mrs White, Laura and yours truly. All but you have accepted.”

“No question, Jupe, we’re in,” Bob agreed enthusiastically. “But you still haven’t answered Pete’s question.”

Jupiter raised his index finger. “I come to that now. First, I went to the Joker-Luck Casino this afternoon. There I talked to the doorman at the entrance. As you know, entrance is strictly forbidden to young people. Then I visited Dr Woolley again at Chaparral Canyon. Last but not least I had to do some small preparations at the salvage yard. Well, that’s about it.”

He got up off his chair. “Now you two have the same information as I do. If you put your brains to the test and review all the incidents in this case in your mind’s eye, you could already figure out what to expect tonight!”

The Three Investigators had not dressed up specially for the upcoming event. T-shirt, jeans and sneakers seemed to be sufficient for them.

When they arrived at Hazelwood House shortly before 7 pm, most of the guests were already there, except for Mr Collins. In the meantime, Jupiter had given Pete, Bob and Mrs Hazelwood precise instructions—whenever the First Investigator was to appear strange to them that evening, they were under no circumstances to react.

Mrs Hazelwood wore an elegant costume of black velvet. Her condition of the last few days was hardly noticeable on her today. Pete noticed that she had got a grip on her problem, at least as far as her appearance was concerned, with a lot of make-up, powder and lipstick.

Laura served delicious canapés. Apparently she liked the role of a housekeeper, because although it was outside her working hours, she still wore the apron and a white bonnet on her head. She had just uncorked a bottle of wine.

The most striking manifestation was undoubtedly Mrs White. She had squeezed into a strapless dress of poison green sequins. She was wearing high heels in lemon-yellow boots. As The Three Investigators hung their jackets on the coat hooks, she came towards them effusively.

“Jupiter, Pete and Bob! How I am happy to see you!”

“Huh?” hissed the Second Investigator to his friends. “What’s got into her all of a sudden?”

“I’m so unspeakably embarrassed, I don’t dare look in the mirror anymore! But I have to stand up for my mistakes. I have already apologized to Janet and Laura.” The teacher tugged at her dress in embarrassment. “My wallet... I found it this morning. What a relief!”

“Really?” suspected Jupiter. “Where did you find it?”

“I hardly understand it myself. But when I was cleaning my car with the vacuum cleaner at the petrol station today, my eyes fell under the passenger seat. And there it was! You cannot imagine how I felt at that moment. On the one hand, a big stone fell from my heart, but much stronger was my bad conscience because I had expressed such ugly suspicions. Can you forgive me again? If I had suspected—”

The doorbell interrupted Mrs White’s flow of speech. Laura opened to greet Mr Collins.

“Forgive my tardiness, Miss, but I’ve been held up at work.” The beekeeper entered the hall. “I really hurried and even skipped my dinner.”

The housekeeper smiled. “You’re still in time, Mr Collins. So far, the guests hasn’t been scoffing up my canapés. So you can stuff your belly full of them without any inhibitions.”

During the next half hour, food and drinks were served, and trivial conversations were held. Mrs Hazelwood was remarkably silent. She sat restlessly in an armchair, sipping a glass of wine now and again. But then suddenly she rose and asked for attention. The guests fell silent.

“I cannot and will not hide from you the fact that I have suffered many blows in my life. I often asked myself secretly whether the world had left me behind or simply forgot me. When I lost my sight, I even began to doubt whether it even existed. But enough about me. Tonight, I have invited you all here to offer you the unique opportunity to get a bargain before the big rush.”

“That sounds exciting!” Mr Collins has already put the ninth canapé into his mouth.

“When I was still one of the sighted,” the lady continued, “I have built up an extensive library over the years. Art books, textbooks, novels and classical literature, just to name a few sections of this collection. It was a difficult decision, but after I lost my eyesight, I realized that I had to part with these treasures in order not to break mentally. These three young gentlemen here,” she pointed to Jupiter, Bob and Pete, “stood by my side energetically and came up with a dazzling idea. It is thanks to them that

every single book in my library will now be auctioned off on an Internet auction site from Monday.

“You, dear guests, have done me many a helpful service in the last few days, for which I would now like to return the favour. Therefore, I would like to make you an offer. On the serving trolley you will find lists on which all book titles, sorted alphabetically, are available for sale. Anyone who is interested in buying one or more books will have the opportunity to do so this evening. The flat rate is \$10 per title.”

“Janet!” it took Mrs White by surprise. “As your friend, why am I only finding out about this now?” She hurried to the tea trolley and hastily picked up one of the lists. “First come, first served!”

The Three Investigators and Mr Collins also studied with interest the list of book titles, with which Bob had revised with the help of the computer.

“Just a point to note...” Mrs Hazelwood continued. “It is now stored, still packed in boxes, in the storeroom on the premises of his uncle, The Jones Salvage Yard in Rocky Beach. If you are interested in buying, I should perhaps mention that Jupiter is responsible for handling the transaction. If you want to buy a book, you let him know now, and perhaps he will arrange for you to collect the books at the salvage yard.”

“Yes,” the First Investigator added importantly. “I will be at the storeroom of the salvage yard from 8 am to noon tomorrow packing the books for your collection. You can give me a call before you come.”

Then Jupiter joined in the rest of the guests looking at the book lists. Bob helped to take the orders.

Looking at the list, suddenly Jupiter’s eyes started to glow. “I don’t believe it! Fantastic, Mrs Hazelwood! I didn’t notice this earlier, but this is one book that I myself would like to have!”

“What book are you talking about?” Mrs White asked. “I hope it’s not *The World of Fashion Designers*. I’m not going to let you take it away from me!”

Jupiter ignored Mrs White’s comment. “This! *Heraldry—The History of Coats of Arms*. This subject interests me greatly! I believe this book shows the heraldic pictures in their primitive beginnings with rafters, shields, sloping beams and stakes. I need to have this book!”

“You can have that book.” Mrs Hazelwood fixed her glasses. “It was my husband’s. It has his personal family coat of arms printed on the cover. If you are interested in heraldry, this coffee-table book is the ideal reading

for you. I'm sure Gill would want you to have it too. Incidentally, this is the only book in my collection that belongs to him."

Jupiter was visibly pleased. "First thing tomorrow morning, I'll search the boxes for this book! Thanks a million, ma'am!"

He turned around and smiled broadly into the other guests, as he studied their faces in detail. But none of the guests seemed to begrudge him for the purchase of that book.

17. Abyss

Around 10 pm, the First and Second Investigators had left the gathering early. It was already pitch dark when Pete parked the MG in a side street and ran over to salvage yard together with Jupiter. Their destination was the storeroom.

“Who knows how much time we have left,” Jupe worried as he removed the padlock on the storeroom door. “I am also annoyed that Mrs Hazelwood did not take no for an answer. She’s dying to get into the grand finale. I had to agree as she wouldn’t have performed the comedy at the gathering earlier.”

The two switched on their flashlights and entered the spacious storeroom. Jupiter guided his friend to the stack of book boxes, carefully opened a lid and shone a light into it. On top lay the voluminous illustrated book *Heraldry—The History of Coats of Arms*.

“You must not touch this book at any cost,” warned the First Investigator strongly. “You must solemnly promise me that.”

“Okay, I’ll do that,” Pete murmured. “Still, I’m getting a little fed up with your secrecy. What’s wrong with this book?”

“If I told you, I guarantee you’d run screaming from the storeroom,” Jupe said. “So for that reason, I’d better keep it to myself.”

Pete got goose bumps. “That makes me feel better.” Suddenly he pulled his head in and pointed to the barred window. “A car is coming!”

Jupiter threw a searching glance outside. “That is Bob and Mrs Hazelwood.” He carefully closed the lid of the box. Then he stepped outside.

Bob steered the Beetle to the salvage yard and parked it, as agreed, at the open garage where Uncle Titus normally parked his truck. Jupiter’s uncle and aunt were away visiting relatives over the weekend.

“Hi, Jupe. Hi, Pete!” Bob greeted his friends as he stepped out of the garage with Mrs Hazelwood, who had hooked up with him. “The gathering came to an abrupt end when our client expressed her state of fatigue. Within minutes, the little gathering broke up.”

“Excellent, ma’am,” praised Jupiter. “We should go to the storeroom right now. Who knows how greedy our unknown person is and how quickly he or she will turn up here.”

After the four of them had entered the storeroom, Jupiter locked the door from the inside and removed the key. “I removed the padlock for security reasons. We don’t want to make it too difficult for the burglar. After all, it would be a shame if he were to fail at it and therefore withdraw without having done anything. The door lock shouldn’t be too difficult even for a beginner.”

The First Investigator led the lady into a small niche behind a high, discarded office cabinet on one side of the storeroom door. There he had placed a chair.

“I must ask you, ma’am, to follow my instructions strictly. From the moment the burglar enters the storeroom, you must be very quiet. Not a sound must pass your lips. Do you think you can handle that?”

“Are you trying to insult me?” she replied curtly.

“I am just pointing out to you kindly that some things may come to light tonight that will really leave you speechless,” Jupiter added. “So I beg of you—don’t let your emotions get the better of you and stay in your hiding place until your opponent has made a full confession. I know I am asking a great deal of you, ma’am. But believe me, many things will turn out differently afterwards.”

“You scare me, boy.” Slowly, Mrs Hazelwood settled in the chair.

“I’m sorry, but if I had my way, you wouldn’t be sitting here now,” Jupiter said. “I would have preferred to have seen you safe in your house. But there’s no turning back now. We need to know the truth.”

“The heraldry book,” Mrs Hazelwood enquired curtly. “What’s that all about?”

“We must be patient.” Even Jupiter became restless and pinched his lower lip obsessively. “Nevertheless, I have something very important to tell you.” Juve’s anxiety now extends to Bob.

“Out with it, Juve.” Bob said restlessly.

“Whatever happens, stay calm and don’t panic. I’ve thought it all out carefully and I’ve taken every precaution.” Jupiter said. “According to my calculations, nothing should go wrong.”

The First Investigator hid with his friends behind a shelf of painting utensils on the other side of the door from Mrs Hazelwood’s hiding place. Time dragged on endlessly. The hands on Pete’s watch were already at

10:30 pm, and still nothing had moved on the premises. Mrs Hazelwood yawned.

At that moment, Pete flinched to death. Suddenly a dark face pressed itself against the bars and stared through the window into the storeroom. Pete nudged Jupiter while pointing to the window. But when the First Investigator looked, the face had already disappeared.

The thoughts whirled feverishly through Pete's head. Had he fallen victim to a hallucination? He was already doubting his sanity when something rattled the door lock. Jupiter put his finger to his lips and stood up silently.

The lock rumbled for a few more seconds, then it snapped to the side. The door opened with a soft squeak. A cone of light from a flashlight first scurried across the floor, then along the walls before the person carefully entered and closed the door. The figure then crept directly towards the stack of book boxes.

As quick as lightning, Jupiter put the key into the lock. Horrified, the person turned around. A shrill scream penetrated the storeroom.

Jupiter locked the door and removed the key. Then he shone his flashlight right into the intruder's face.

"I thought so. I figured it out from the start." Slowly he went towards the person.

"What... what do you want from me?" the intruder said.

"Laura?" Perplexed, Pete stepped out from behind the shelf. Bob followed.

"What are you shining that flashlight at me? Do I have warts on my face?" The housekeeper was soon back under control.

"Same old, same old..." The First Investigator kept shining his flashlight in her face. "But you'll soon run out of cool remarks!"

A grin played around the corners of her mouth. "Are you out of your mind? What's going on here?"

Jupiter apparently remained calm. "You should not have lied to us, Laura. Because that's how we found out about your evil deeds."

"Shut up, fat boy! I've never lied in my life!" Laura cried.

"My sympathy to you for being attacked by the hornets in the garden shed. They stung you up pretty bad. I wouldn't have liked to trade places with you," Jupiter honestly admitted. "But then I asked myself, after you were discharged from the hospital, why did you go back into the shed the next day and pull out the slats at the back wall!"

“What are you talking about? Why would I want to pull out the slats on the wall?” With skilful innocence, Laura tried to underline her credibility.

The First Investigator wasn’t impressed by that. “Because you were looking for something under a sloping beam that nobody else knew about. The first time, the hornets unexpectedly got in your way. Then you came back to finish the job. Unfortunately the object you wanted was not in the shed, so you had to look elsewhere...”

“What do you mean?” Nervously, her eyelids fluttered.

“You turned half of Mrs Hazelwood’s house upside down,” Jupiter continued. “In doing so, you ignored only one important fact—the lady is blind on the surface, but that does not mean she cannot see important changes without her eyesight. The displaced bed under the sloping beam in her bedroom, the slipped carpet in the corridor upstairs and the cupboard in the bathroom!

“Perhaps you were not aware that such activities could go unnoticed. In this case you probably just relied on your sense of proportion, without taking into account that non-sighted people have a heightened sense of hearing, smell and touch.”

Threateningly Laura raised her hand. “You should not underestimate a woman of my calibre. If you don’t retract your accusations immediately, I’m going to take care of every one of you. And that could be extremely painful for you.”

“Are you seriously threatening us?” Pete took a bold step forward. “We will not be intimidated by you.”

“You must have done very cleverly to infiltrate Mrs Hazelwood’s house as a housekeeper,” Jupiter continued. “How you managed that is of no interest to us whatsoever. Your only aim was to search the house as quietly and unobtrusively as possible for something which you only knew was hidden under some sloping beam. But unfortunately this proved to be more difficult than you had initially thought. There was a catch.

“You could not have known that Mrs Hazelwood had been reluctant to leave the house since she became blind, so there was little opportunity for you to conduct your search undetected—which is why you went to the garden shed first. But that’s where the hornet disaster happened to you. I have to admit that I did not count you among the circle of suspicious persons for a long time, because you were a clear victim in the game. Who would voluntarily let hornets disfigure the face in order to appear

unsuspicious as a perpetrator? That the attack of the insects happened by chance while you were pursuing your criminal activities did not occur to me earlier.”

Laura wiped her dry lips. She didn't make a sound. Pete, Bob and Mrs Hazelwood were also spellbound by Jupiter's lecture.

He continued: “The terrible incident with the hornets then gave you a devilish idea, which was extremely convenient for you to continue your search in the house unnoticed. You told Mrs Hazelwood the story of the doctors talking about a sleeping sickness caused by an unknown parasite transmitted by mosquitoes. You were aware that the lady had lost all faith in medicine. This was a useful factor in your approach.

“Although we had placed mosquito nets on all the windows in the house, letting them into the house was pretty easy by temporarily folding back parts of the net. Mrs Hazelwood was accidentally bitten by a mosquito that very evening and she apparently believed that she was infected by dangerous pathogens. It is a mystery to me how you managed to get the mosquito to bite Mrs Hazelwood's hand at the right time.

“Following that, you mixed some sleeping potion into Mrs Hazelwood's food or drink to give her disturbed sleep patterns, which incidentally, is a symptom of the sleeping sickness. This gave her a perfect illusion that she had contracted to this disease.

“Mrs Hazelwood fell into a deep sleep while you were able to go on a quiet search. You were even brazen enough to move the lady's bed while she was drugged and dazed.”

“I can't believe it, Jupe!” The Second Investigator looked Laura in the face with contempt.

“The abyss opens up,” Jupe continued. “But this is probably only the tip of the iceberg!”

Laura showed no emotion.

“But then your actions became more rash.” Jupiter grabbed his head. “A gross mistake, Laura. But in your search, you were sick with greed. You covered that up perfectly with your seemingly relaxed manner. Yet you fell into our trap with your insidious plan!

“You were given a clue of something hidden under a sloping beam, which was why you searched frantically under the sloping beams in the house and the garden shed. Only now we know that the clue was not referring to a physical sloping beam, but one depicted on a picture of a coat of arms!

“So I put on a little show for you at Mrs Hazelwood’s and you fell for it! Did you really think I was interested specifically in a coat of arms with a sloping beam on it? But your alarm bells began to ring on cue. You were naïve enough to think that chance had served you the hiding place on a silver platter. Well, Laura, you’re not the only one who could put up a great act.”

Jupiter took a sharp look at the housekeeper. “By breaking into this storeroom to get to that book broke your neck. It’s the clear proof that you’re the one who wants to snatch something hidden in the book.”

Bob looked down his nose contemptuously. “To administer sleeping pills to Mrs Hazelwood without her knowledge and to set mosquitoes on her without her knowledge, that is gross assault! If she had died from that, you would have a human life on your conscience! Do you realize that?”

“Her life is bungled either way,” Laura replied cold-bloodedly. “A poor wretch who suffered from delusions and complexes since childhood. Not to mention her insect phobia.”

A cold shiver ran down Pete’s spine. “Where did you get that information?”

“It’s obvious,” Jupiter took over for the answer. “It is from the same person who gave her the clue of the sloping beam.”

“And who is that person?” Bob asked, groping in the dark.

“You’d better ask: ‘Who was that person?’” The First Investigator hesitated. “It is none other than Mrs Hazelwood’s late husband, Gill!”

“What?” Pete lost all his features. “What’s the connection?”

“What nonsense are you talking about?” Laura peppered to him. “I have absolutely no idea who he was.”

“On the contrary,” Jupiter lowered his voice. “You were his secret lover, am I right?”

Laura was stunned and kept quiet.

“Alright, you’re a smart guy,” Laura said. “Gill adored me. To him, I was the woman of his dreams. It was only a matter of time before he would leave his wife. This year we were going to get married and settle down in Las Vegas. He couldn’t wait to kiss her goodbye. To him, Janet was just a means to an end. She was blind before she lost her eyesight... or she’d have realized Gill was cheating on her from top to bottom.”

Suddenly, Laura startled and took a step back.

Mrs Hazelwood came out from behind the cabinet and walked slowly towards her.

18. Redemption

“That is a vicious lie!” Mrs Hazelwood struggled to keep her composure. “You are the meanest woman I have ever known! Gill would never have got involved with a bitch like you! He loved me.”

Laura laughed superiorly. “You’re turning a blind eye to the truth, sweetheart. You loved him. But he didn’t love you. There’s a world of difference. You’ve bored him, believe me. He described his relationship with you as ‘comfort, casual, but irrelevant’. You can’t imagine how much he fired up the desire to build us both a home in Las Vegas.”

“Gill was broke. He didn’t have a dime on the high side. He was also addicted to gambling.” The lady was gasping for breath. “Everything you’re telling me is a pack of lies!”

Jupiter cleared his throat. “I don’t think so, ma’am. Gill has saved up a huge fortune in his last years.”

“It’s impossible,” Mrs Hazelwood insisted, contradicting herself. “He kept throwing money down the casino’s throat. Gill was addicted to gambling.”

“That was how he wanted it to look,” Jupiter explained. “In fact, he hasn’t even paid a single visit to his alleged regular Joker-Luck Casino. I personally checked that out. The doorman at the entrance does not recognize Gill’s face at all. I borrowed the photograph from your bedroom, ma’am, and showed it to him. He assured me that he had never seen your husband before. And he has to know, after all, according to him, he has been standing in front of that casino for ten years without ever having been sick a day.”

“Then the money still exists, Jupe!” Bob’s eyes widened. “Instead of spending it in the casino, Gill secretly saved it up! And I presume that he was with you all the time he was pretending to be at the casino.”

“Of course he was with me,” Laura pricked up her mouth as if she wanted to kiss the air. “And I must admit that we had a lot of fun together!”

Mrs Hazelwood suddenly began to waver and leaned on Jupiter.

“Oh, are tears rolling down your face?” Laura’s lips narrowed to a line. “Where is the coat of arms book? If you do not hand it over to me immediately, you will not leave this storeroom unharmed. And that’s not an empty threat.” Ready to attack, she raised her fist.

Jupiter actuated the light switch that put the ceiling lights into operation. “The book is in box number nine, where you put it yourself. Behind page twenty-six, on which the coat of arms with the sloping beam is shown, Gill has cut a cavity into the following pages. In it he hid the money.”

“Really clever to put the money in a book,” commented Pete.

“Gill knew full well that Mrs Hazelwood would never look into that particular book again,” Jupiter added.

“I’m warning you, fatso.” Laura suspiciously approached the stack of book boxes. “If this is a trick...” She opened the lid, spotted the book, grabbed it and opened it.

At that moment, dozens of buzzing hornets escaped from the cavity, immediately surrounding Laura. Screeching, she hurled the book far from her and held her hands in front of her face.

Almost immediately, Jupiter unlocked the door of the storeroom. He pushed Mrs Hazelwood, Bob and Pete outside and locked the door. Laura’s blood-curdling screams never stopped.

“The hornets will kill her!” Pete pressed his face to the bars outside the window and looked inside the storeroom. “We’ve got to get her out of there!”

The First Investigator began to whistle calmly. “We leave that task to Inspector Cotta. I’ll call him right away. In the meantime, Laura has plenty of time to make friends with the insects. They’re on loan from Dr Woolley and are essentially harmless.”

“Harmless hornets?” Bob questioned. “You’ll have to explain that to us.”

“Many insects copy the appearance of poisonous species in order to protect themselves from enemies. The hornet moth is an example of this. It looks like a hornet, but without the poisonous sting! In fact, from the name itself, they are moths not hornets.”

Pete laughed and hit his knee. “Brilliant idea, Juve! There’s a lot we can learn from you!”

Dark clouds appeared in the sky as The Three Investigators and Mrs Hazelwood sat under a parasol in the lady's garden the next afternoon. The sultriness had reached its peak. "In a few minutes, redemption will occur. I can feel the storm already." Mrs Hazelwood leaned back.

"I am eternally grateful to you three... even though I had to swallow the bitterest pill of my life. It won't be easy for me to come to terms with the new facts. But at least I can let go of my guilt."

"We spoke with Inspector Cotta on the phone this morning," Jupe reported. "He questioned Laura until the early morning hours. After all that came out, she faces a heavy prison sentence."

"It serves her right," Mrs Hazelwood said.

"My sentiments exactly, ma'am," the First Investigator agreed. "What interested me most was how she managed to get the mosquitoes on you, when you actually seem immune to mosquito bites. I must admit that the answer really baffled me."

"Don't put Mrs Hazelwood through any unnecessary torture, Jupe!" Pete urged impatiently.

"It's okay, Pete," Mrs Hazelwood said. "I'd like to know that."

"Laura has done some studies and found out what you can reliably attract mosquitoes with. The substance for this is available in pharmacies—butyric acid—a chemical compound that is formed when certain fats break down. The stuff smells terrible, but mosquitoes are crazy about it.

"A tiny drop, which Laura pressed on the back of your hand while holding it, was already enough for the mosquito to drill into your skin. The cold compresses that Laura put on your forehead were also soaked with this acid. But in such small doses that you couldn't detect the smell."

"And where did she get the mosquitoes?" The lady moved her glasses.

"She didn't have to move around a lot to get them. It's from the recycling bin behind your house."

"That sly bitch." The lady clenched her hands in fists. "I just don't understand why she only showed up here after Gill had been dead for a year."

"The inspector was able to find that out, too." Jupiter looked up at the sky with concern. It darkened as the wind began to rustle the leaves of the trees. "Laura threw herself at another man's neck after Gill's death. He was very wealthy. So she didn't need the money Gill was hiding in the book. But a few weeks ago, that connection broke up. From then on, she

went into serious financial difficulties. And necessity is the mother of invention...”

He pulled out an envelope and gave it to Mrs Hazelwood. “May I return your property?”

The lady began to tremble. “I can’t remember how much money he’s taken from me over the years with his lies. How much is it?”

“What I can say is if you use it sparingly, it will last you for a long time, ma’am.”

A deafening thunder rang in the longed-for thunderstorm.

The four sat under the parasol in silence, fervently wishing that the storm would bring the hoped-for change in climate.